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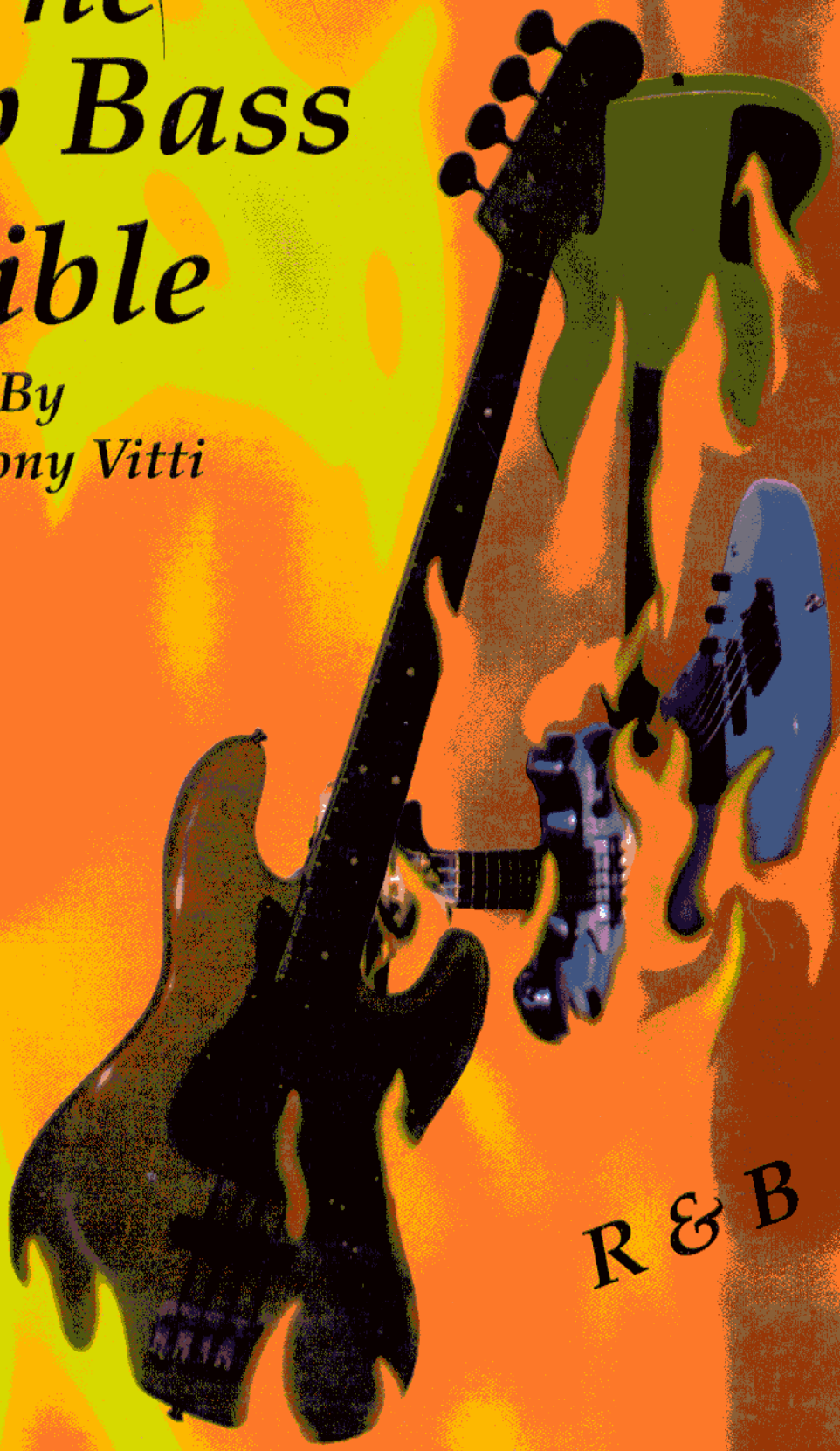
The Slap Bass Bible

By
Anthony Vitti



Hip-Hop

R & B

Funk

90 Minute Tape Included

The Slap Bass Bible

Published by DaaDoo Music

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Forward

When writing this book, I was trying to remember how I learned to play this style of music. I started playing bass in 1980. At that time I was primarily into progressive rock; bands like "Rush" and "Yes". When I graduated high school and came to Berklee College of Music in 1982, I was turned on to a lot of music I had heard, but not really listened to. There were players at the college who really had it all together when it came to playing a variety of styles of music. I realized early on that if I wanted to make a living in this business, it wasn't necessarily about being the best bass player. It was much more important to be a competent, well-rounded player who was as comfortable playing jazz, funk or Latin music as well as playing rock. I realized that being proficient at all styles of music would better a player's chances at getting work and not limit the kind of gigs one could get because of being labeled a "Jazz" or "Funk" player.

With that foundation in mind, let me say that I come across hundreds of young players while teaching at Berklee College of Music who immediately want to start playing slap bass before they have a good foundation in theory, technique, and the traditional role of a bass player. Make no mistake about it, I am into playing bass as a *supporting* player for the band. I have no desire to be a "Solo" bassist. Not to say that I do not enjoy taking solos. There is a big difference between the two. Playing slap bass to me is just another way of expressing yourself on the instrument. Just like a bow is to a string bass player, there are sounds and ways of phrasing things that you just can't get any other way.

The style of slap bass I play is what I call the "old school" of playing. When I started playing slap bass, I was turned on to the happening players of that time in the early 80's. The most influential early player for me, and most other people, was Louis Johnson from the mid-seventies to the early eighties. He was the guy for playing Funk. You should check out the old Brother's

Johnson albums and his work with Quincy Jones and Michael Jackson. That is still some of the hippest stuff I've heard.

People often ask me about Larry Graham and how he influenced my playing. I never listened much to Larry, probably because when I started playing, Louis Johnson was so big on the funk scene. That brings up an important point of this book. This is not a history of slap bass. This book is about the players, groups and kinds of grooves that helped me to create my style of playing. I find that what a lot of younger players today consider to be Funk, I consider Rock. Players like Les Claypool, Flea, and Victor Wooten are all wonderful players, but I am coming from a strictly R&B background. Band such as Cameo, Maze, The Gap Band, The Dazz Band. Artists such as Luther Vandross, Jeffrey Osborne, James Ingram and players like Louis Johnson, Aaron Mills, Robin Duhe, Gary Granger, and Marcus Miller (more on him later). All the grooves in this book are in the style of R&B, but in many cases, I have adapted what I consider to be a more modern technique to traditional sounding R&B bass lines. Pay particular attention to which notes are popped and thumbed. A lot of these grooves appear easy until you play them with the technique I am trying to get across. Also, pay attention to the time and feel of the grooves. Listen to the tape. The feel and sound of your instrument make all the difference in the world.

Let's talk briefly about the sound. People often ask me about getting a good funk sound. Anyone who knows me, knows I live by three words: "Fender Jazz Bass"! Enough said.

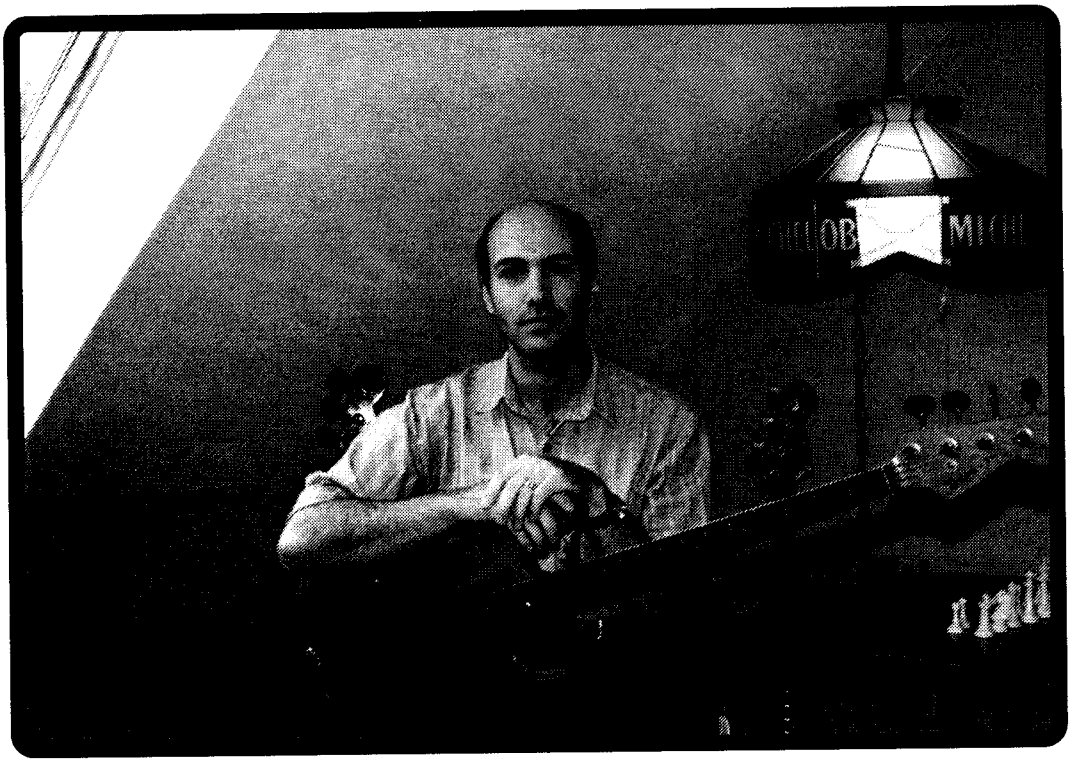
The one bass player who has undoubtably had the most impact on my playing style is Marcus Miller. When I first heard Marcus play with David Sanborn and Luther Vandross, I remember being completely blown away. I had never heard anybody play like that. Hearing him play totally changed my approach to the bass. His sound, feel and versatility are second to none. In my opinion, he has picked up the torch which has been passed on from guys such as James Jamerson, Stanley Clark, Louis Johnson and Jaco Pastorious and has expanded the voice of the electric bass.

When it comes to improvising over the grooves, I want you to keep in mind what I call the "rhythmic appropriateness" of your fills. I look at rhythms

the way most people look at pitch. It's obvious when people play the wrong notes over chords, but to me, it is just as obvious when people play rhythms that have nothing to do with the groove of the tune. If you are playing a groove with an 8th or 16th note feel, play fills that have similar rhythms to the bass line. If you play a fill with 1/4 note triplets over an 8th note funk groove, it is really going to draw attention away from the groove. Think of it as the way a jazz player quotes the melody of a song. Start by improvising on the grooves by quoting the rhythms and then try taking it further. You want to be a player who supports the band or soloist, not someone who plays too busy or distracts from the overall sound of the groove.

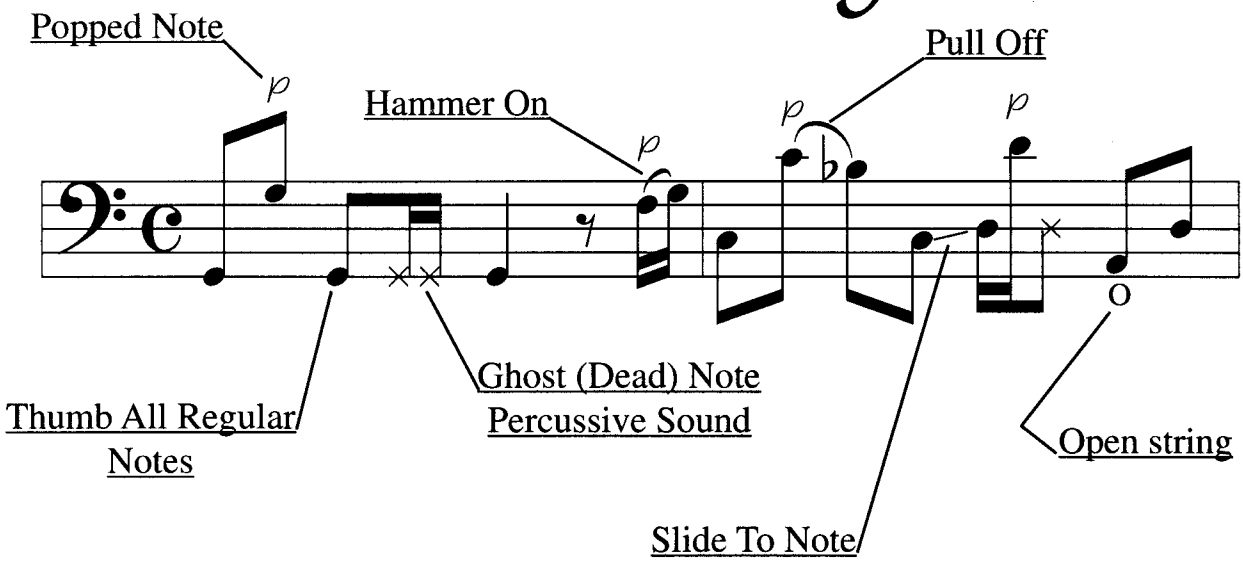
I hope you enjoy this book. It was a project I had been talking about doing for years and have put a lot of thought into it. I provided drum grooves with each bass line as a tool for practicing. This way you can program up a drum machine and work at any tempo you want. Ultimately, I hope you will get together with a drummer and play and improvise on these grooves.

Anthony Vitti

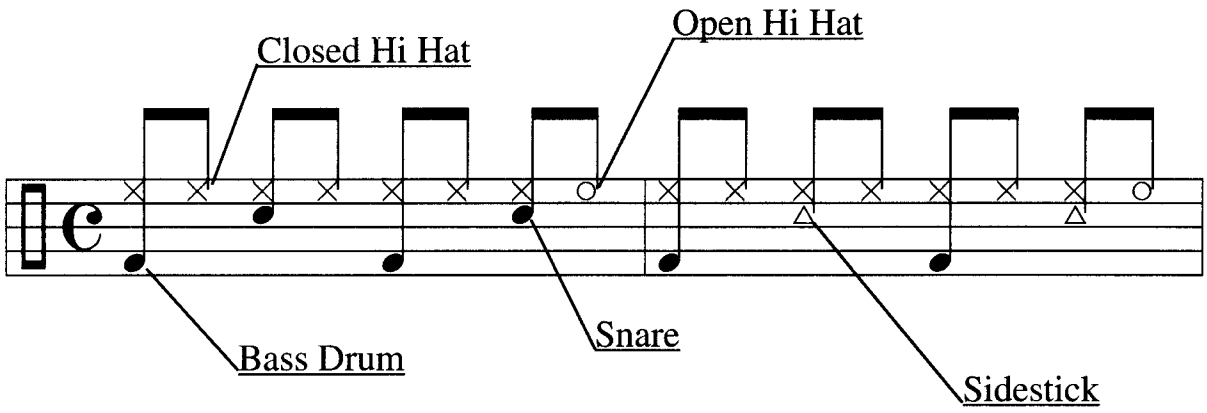


This book is dedicated to my wife, Sandra, and my daughter, Victoria. Sandra did all the page layouts, photography and text for the book as well as the cover design, and allowed me the time to write and record the music. A musician couldn't ask for a better partner. I would also like to dedicate this book to my brother, Jerry, who was not only a wonderful bass player, but has become a never ending source of inspiration in my life.

Bass Key

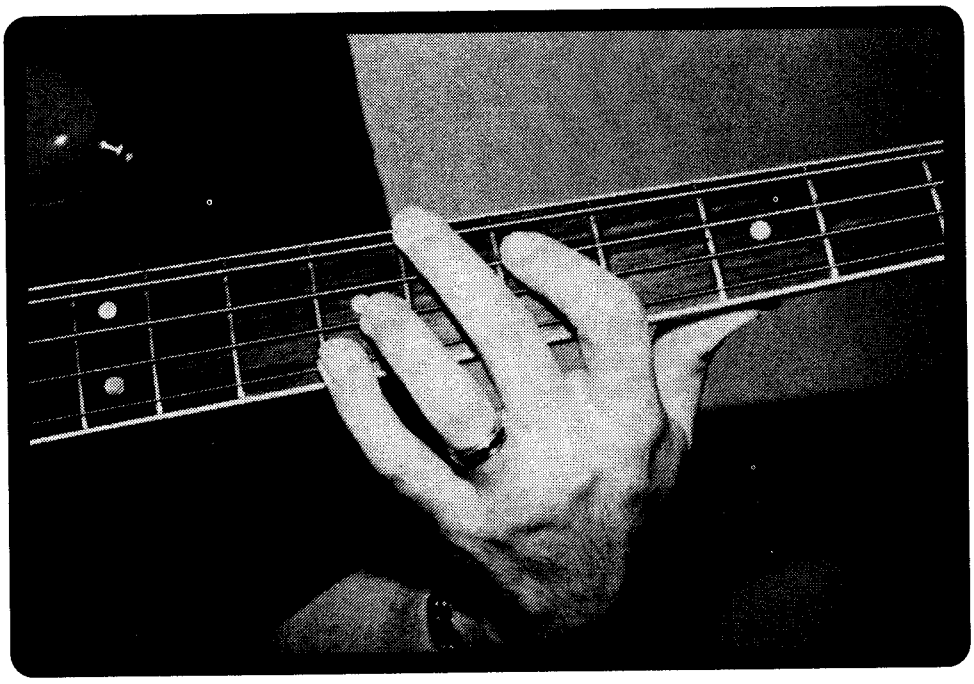


Drum Key

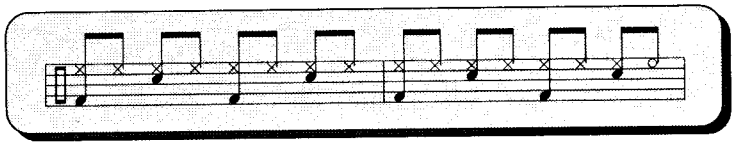


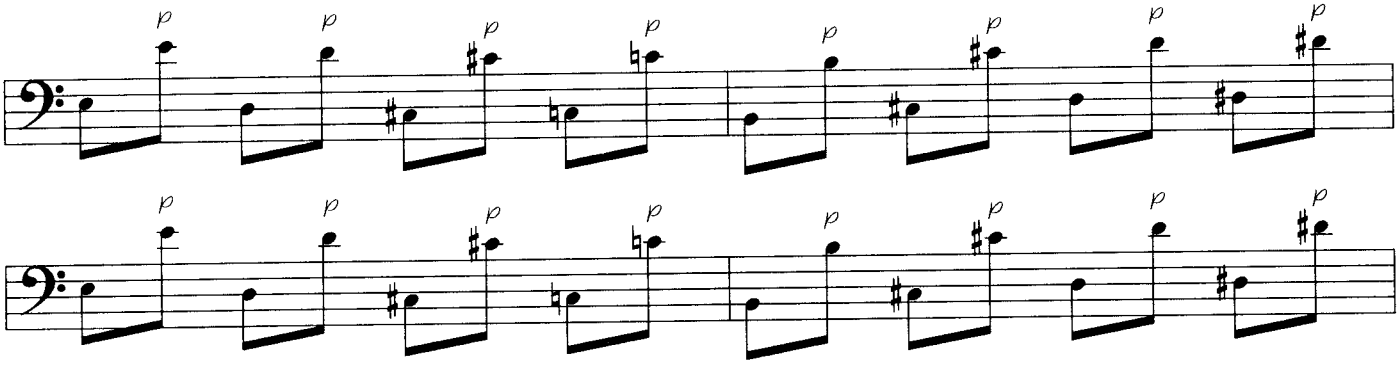
Straight Funk

All of the grooves in this section of the book are played to drum grooves with straight 8th or 16th note feels. Be careful not to swing any of the grooves. The 3rd chapter of this book is devoted to shuffle and hip hop feels. These lines should be played as straight as possible. Check out the tape for reference and to hear how I'm phrasing the lines. The length of your notes and the space that you leave between notes of the utmost importance in making these lines groove as hard as possible. You should realize that it is the space I'm leaving that is really grooving. A great groove incorporates a lot of give and take between a drummer and a bass player. Much of the time I feel like I'm playing in between the spaces. I tried to organize the lines according to difficulty starting off with grooves that incorporate a lot of octaves since this is the root of a lot of slap lines. Don't just gloss over some of these grooves thinking they are too easy. Play them until they are slammin'. I have never heard an easy groove, only a lame one.

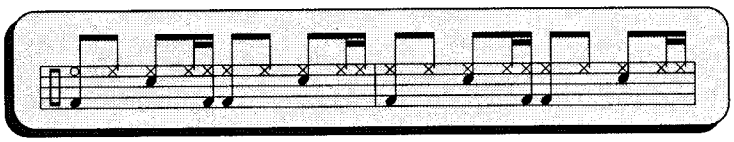


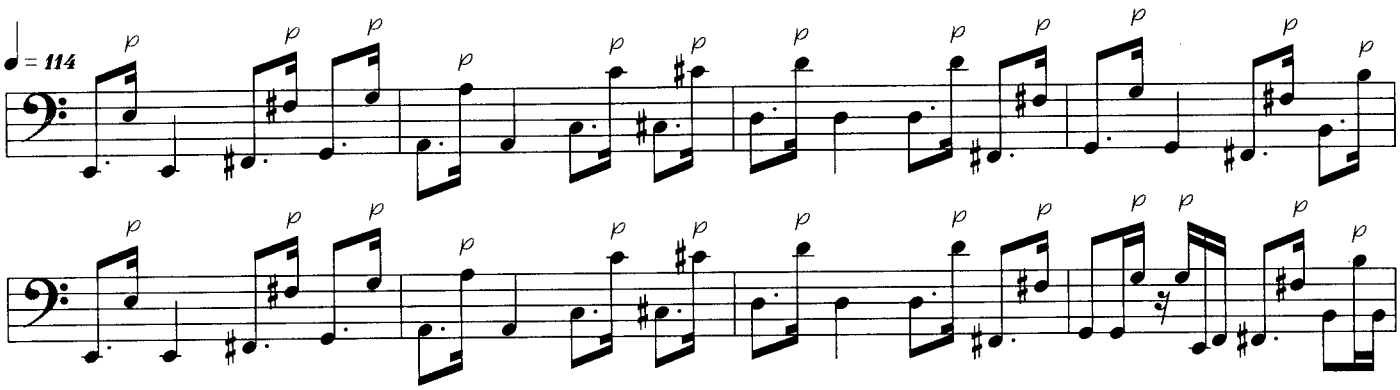
Playing octaves is the basis for playing slap bass. The above picture shows my left hand technique. Notice I play the octaves with my first and fourth fingers while laying my second finger across all the strings, thus muting all the strings.



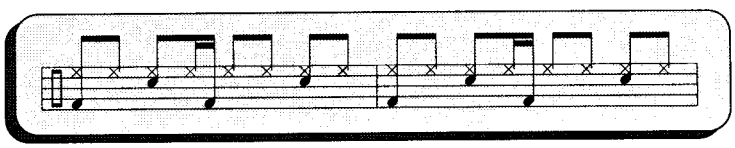


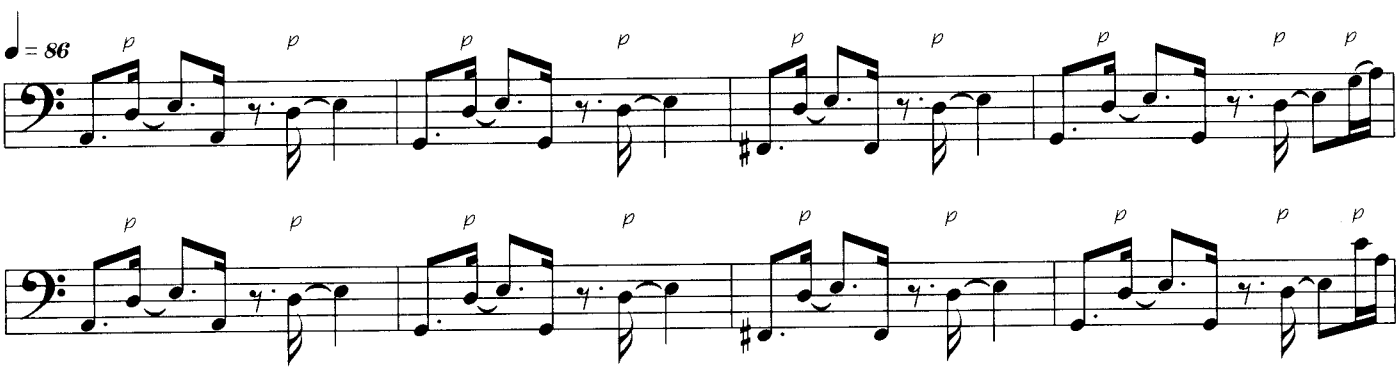
The tendancy will be to drag the 16th note anticipations in all these measures. Pay particular attention to that. Also try using the hand position that I demonstrated in the previous example when playing these octaves.



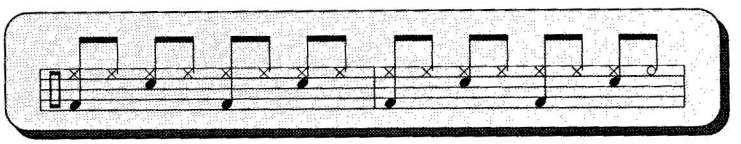


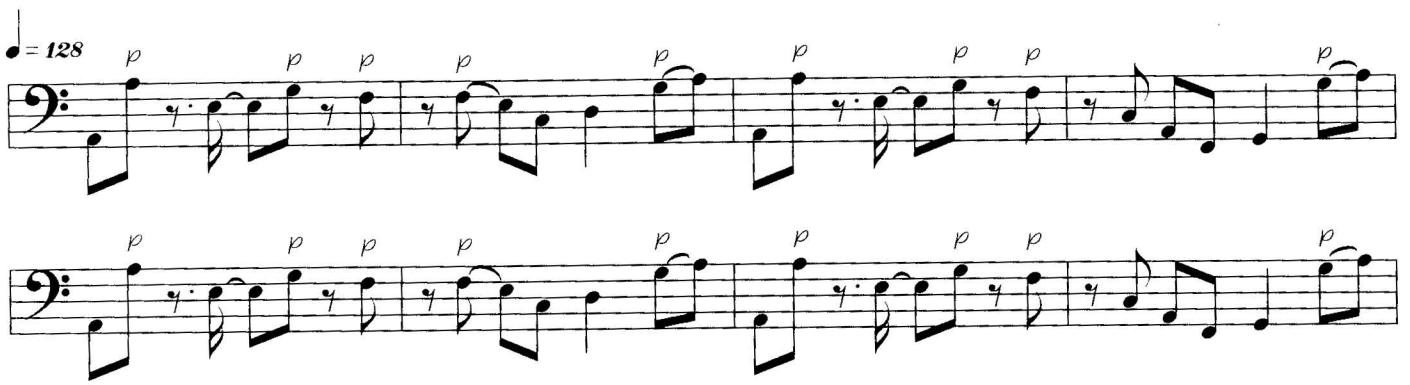
A groove like this should feel like it's rolling over the time. Your playing should be very consistant throughout this line.



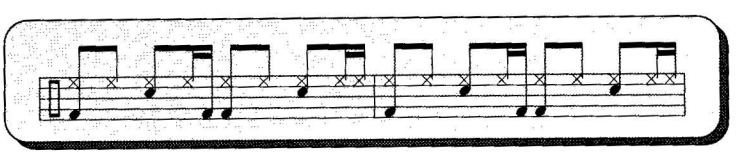


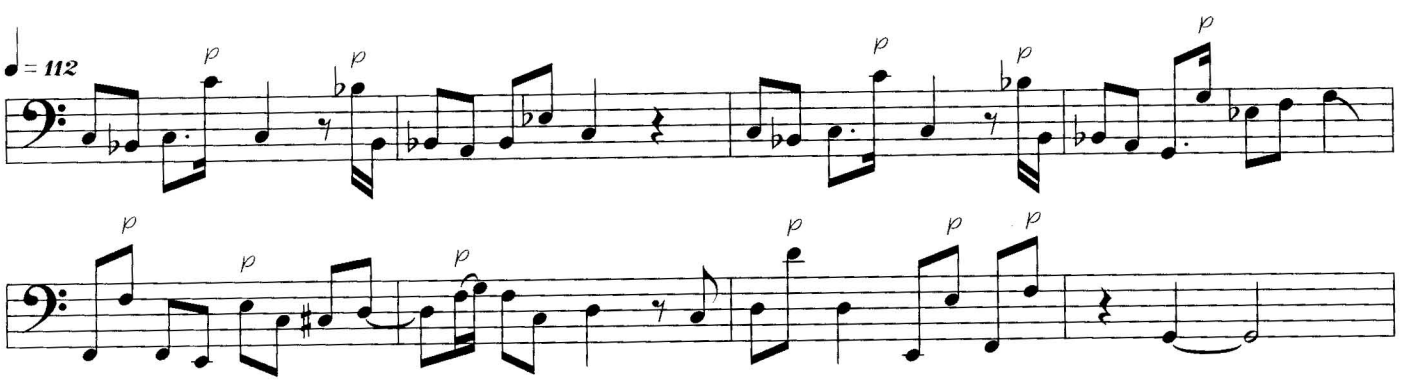
The length of the notes are going to make a big difference as to whether or not this groove sounds good. Listen to the difference in length between the popped and the thumbed notes that I'm playing.



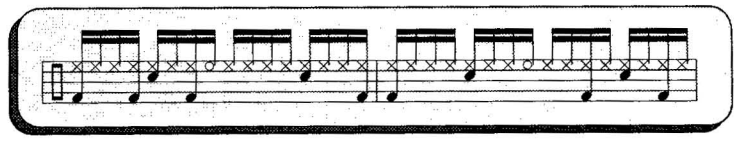


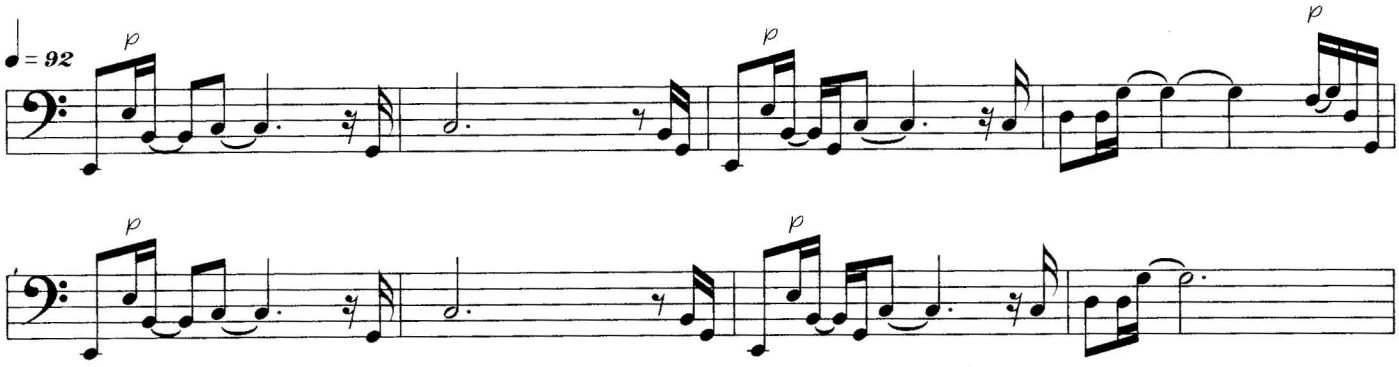
Be careful of the fingerings, especially in measures five and six. Take the time to play the line as it is notated.



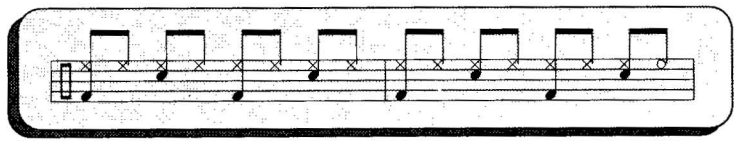


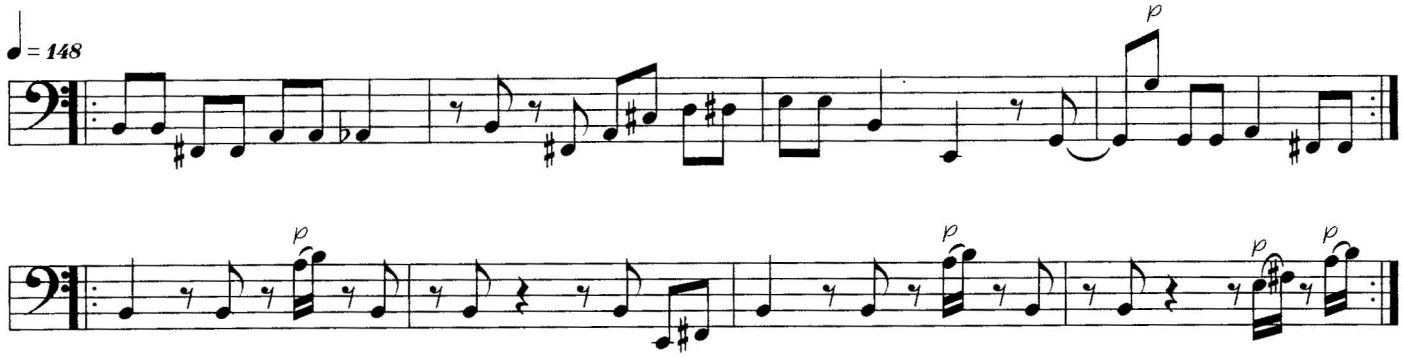
This is a nice slow groove. Listen to the spaces between what you are playing. This is a good example of give and take between a drummer and a bass player and how they combine to put out one sound.



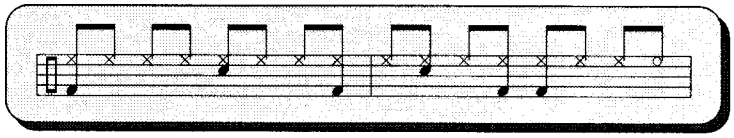


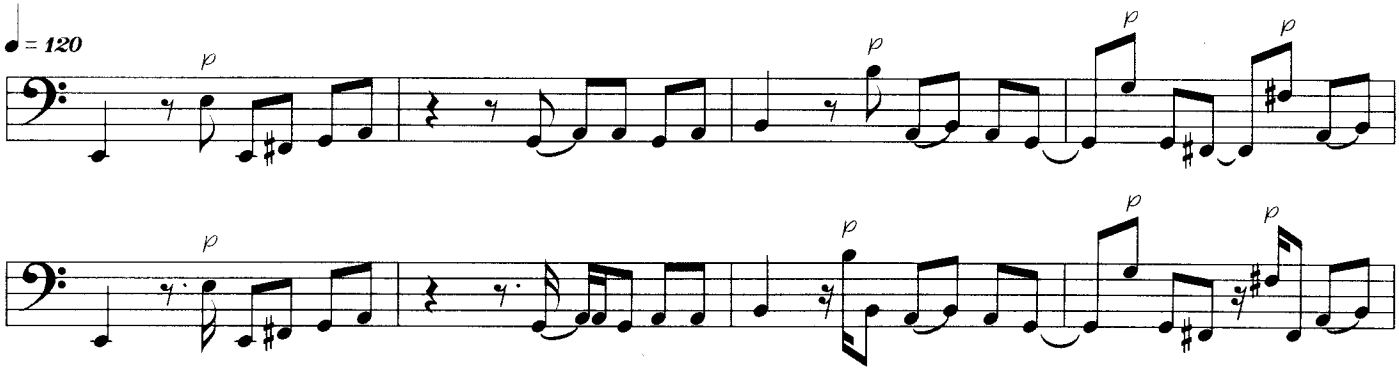
Try playing this line very slow at first. Make sure that you are muting all of the strings that you are not playing and then try increasing the speed.



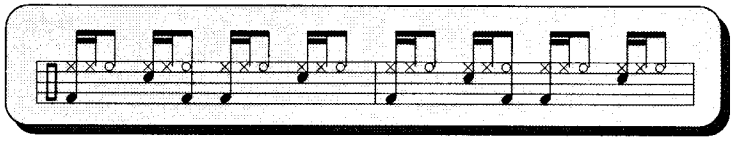


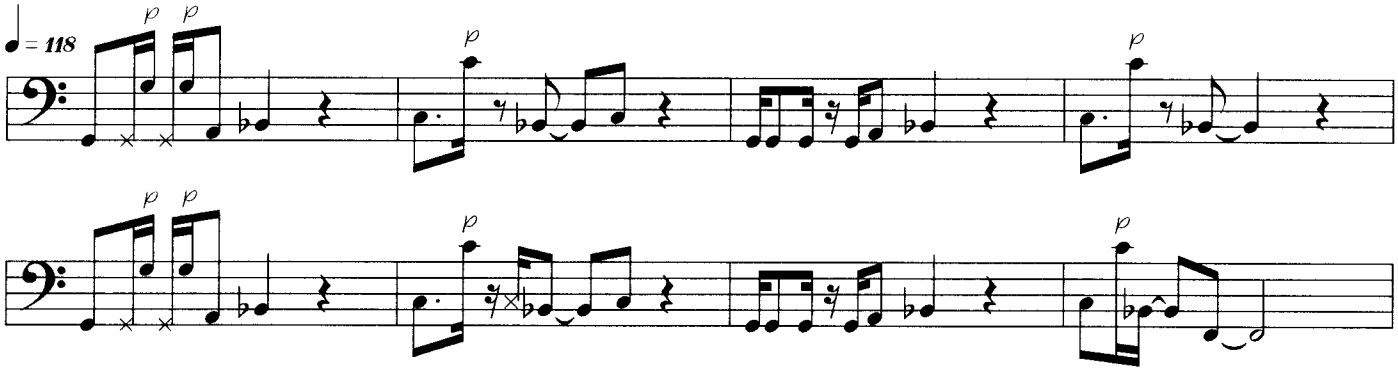
Play the notes in this line nice and long. Watch out for the fingerings in measures seven and eight making sure that you don't leave any space between the notes.



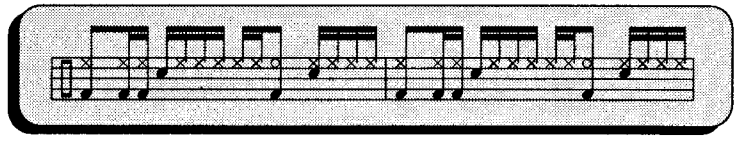


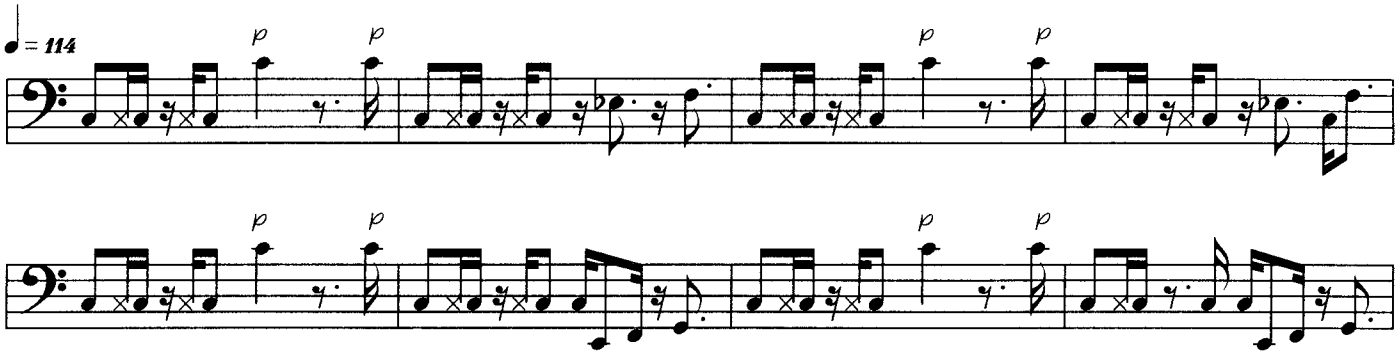
Play the 16th notes very evenly in the first and fifth measures. Take your time when working out the rhythms, making sure that you play them correctly.



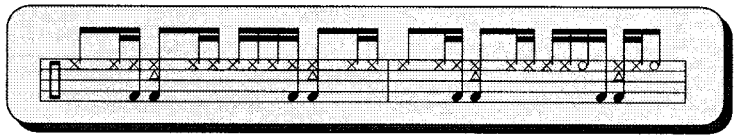


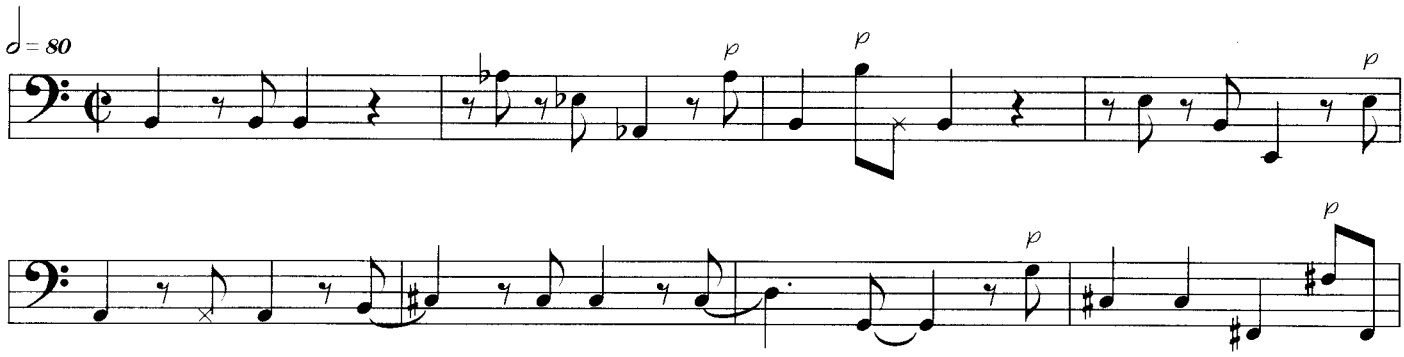
In this groove, the ghosted notes are just as important as the actual pitches. They should be played at the same volume. In the above picture, I am showing one method I use for muting the "E" string when popping notes on the upper strings.



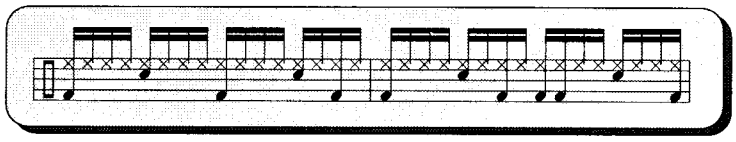


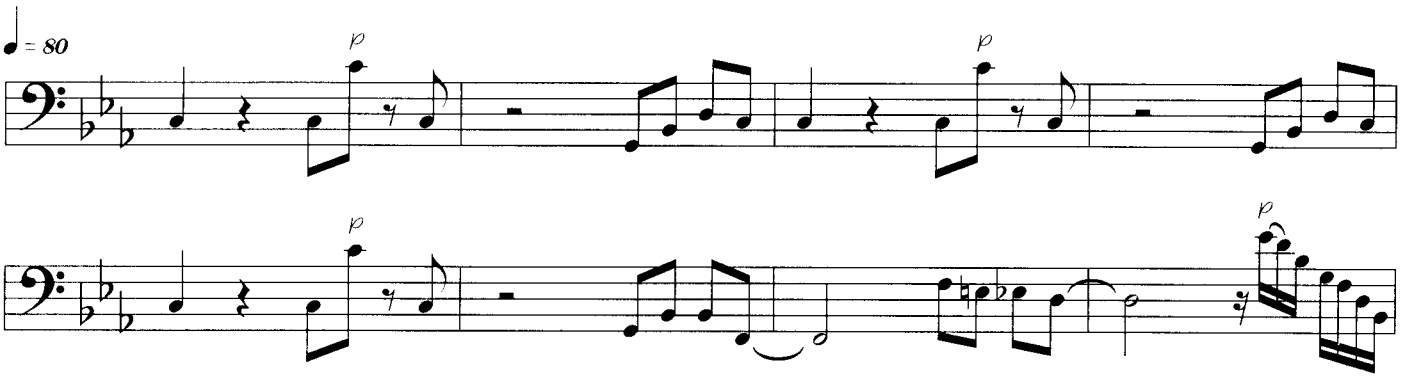
The drum groove on this one is written with the quarter note at 80, but notice that the groove is written with the *half* note at 80. This is because the bass line is felt in 2. I did this so I could notate a two bar drum pattern.



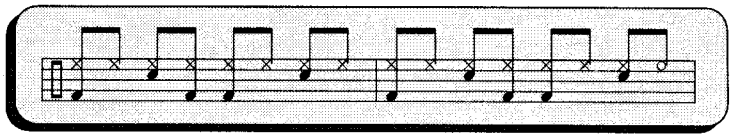


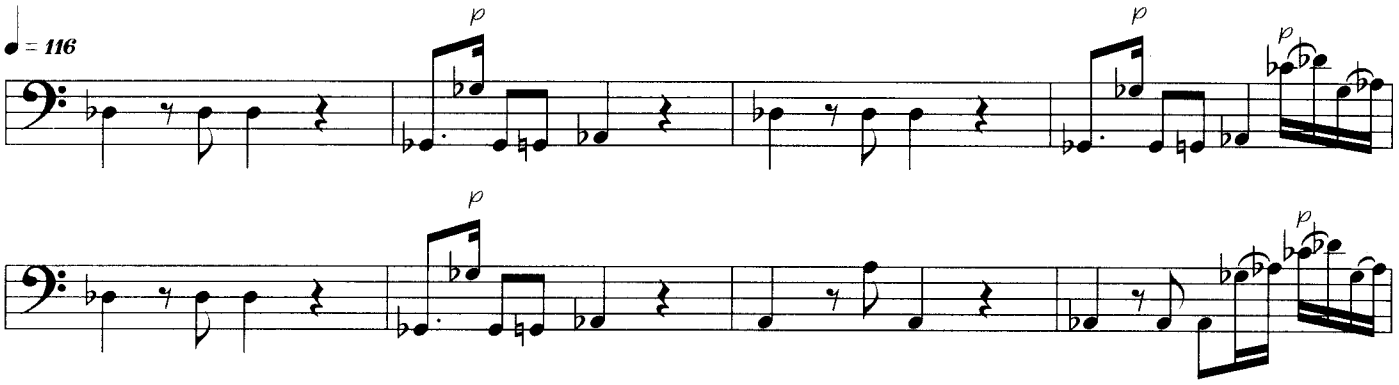
This is not that difficult a groove until you get to the eighth measure and try to play the 16th notes evenly against the 8th note feel.



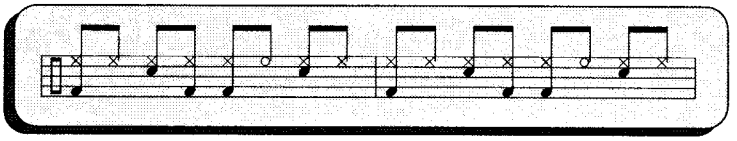


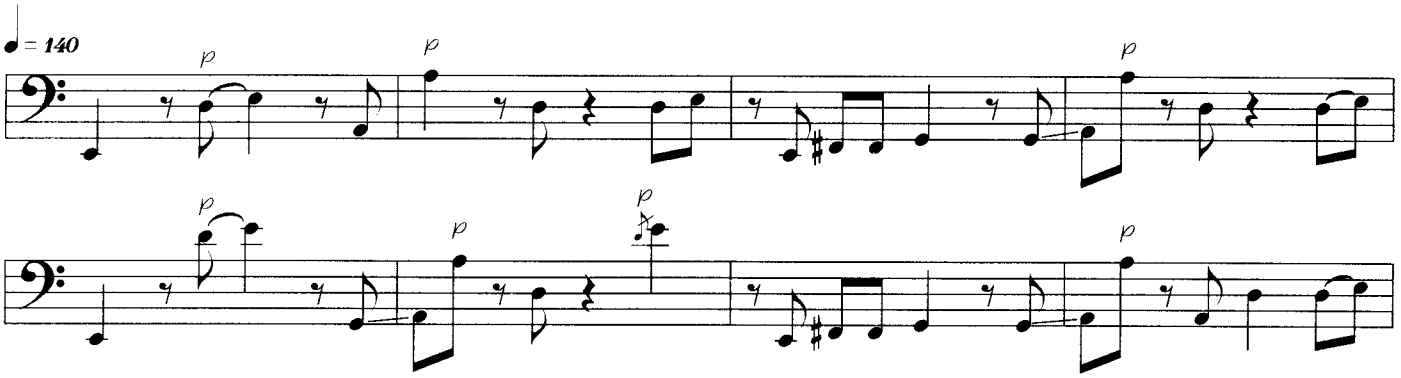
The fills in the fourth and eighth measures are very typical slap bass fills. Practice them until you get their sound very even. The tendancy will be to rush fills like these.



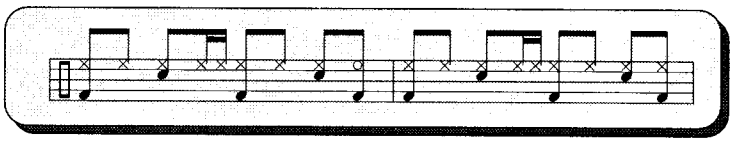


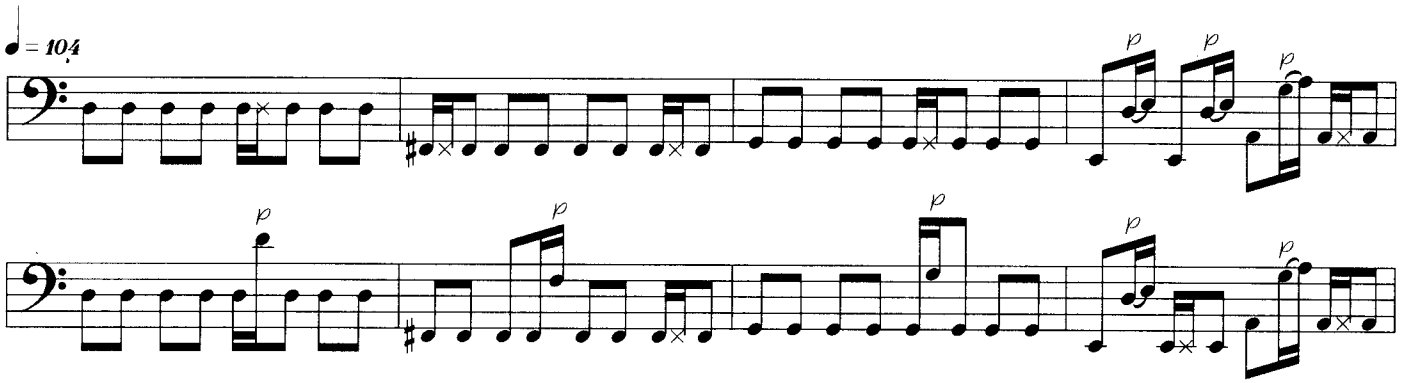
In the first measure, I play the D to the E on the fifth to seventh frets on the "A" string. I do this to avoid playing the open strings. Not only do open strings have a different tone, but they are hard to control.



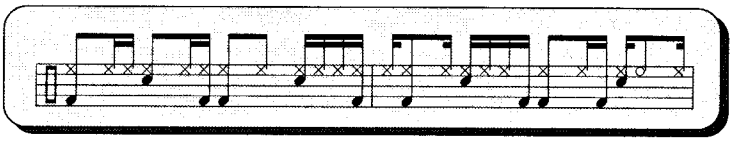


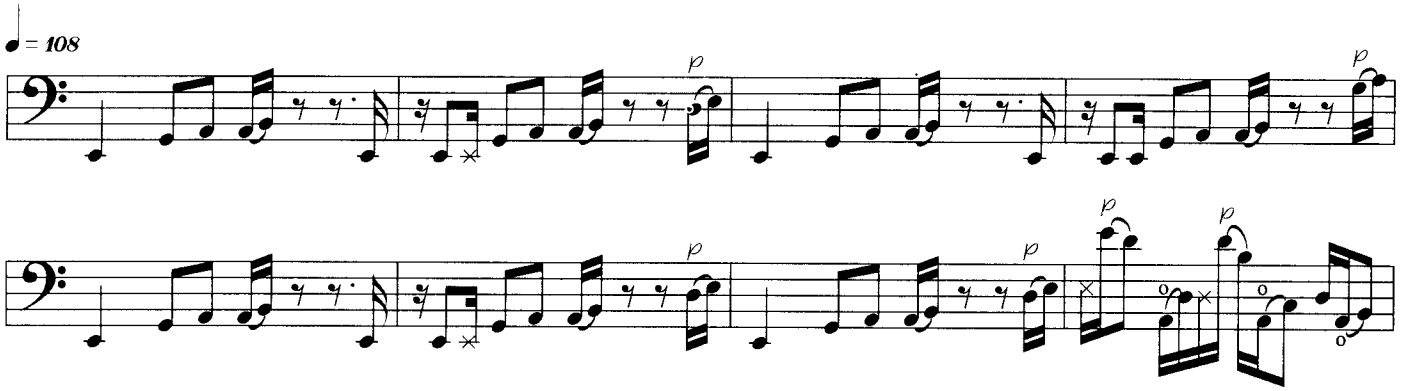
The 8th notes are played very short and very steady. Try holding this line steady for an extended period of time. Playing a line like this is a lesson in consistancy.



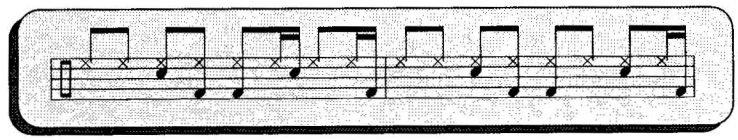


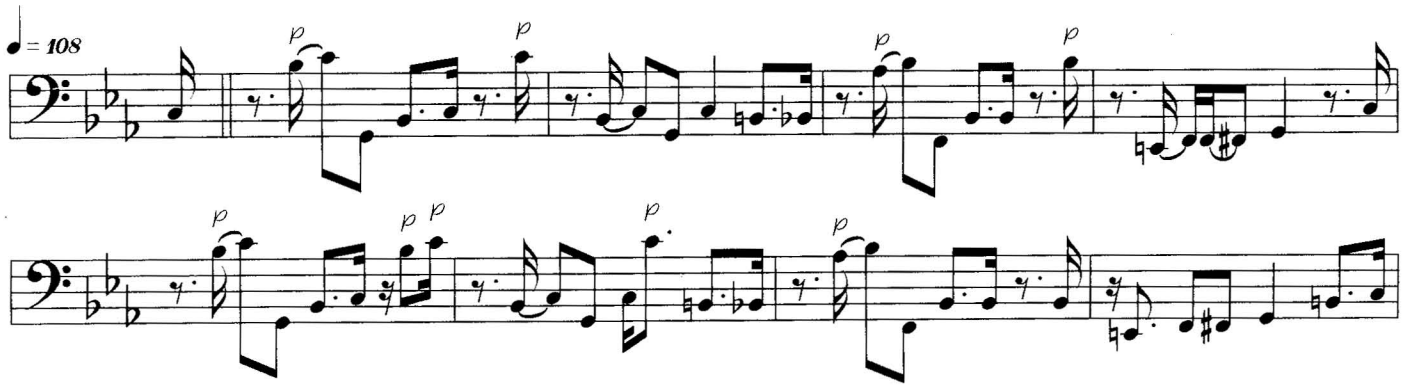
Pay attention to the rhythms, especially the 16th note anticipation at the end of some of the measures. The fill in the eighth measure incorporates open strings, hammer-ons, and pull-offs.



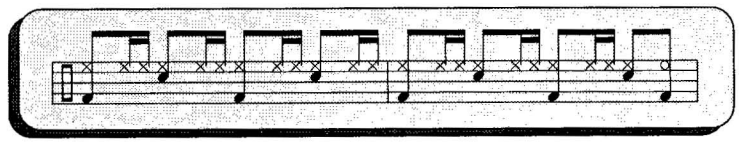


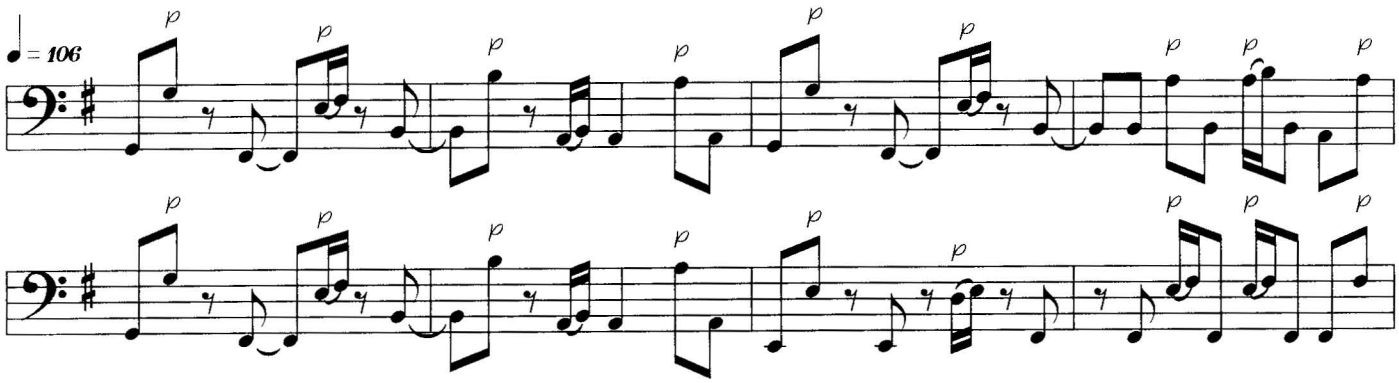
This line contains some tough rhythms. Take time to work out the line in the fourth measure. Play it exactly as notated. This an important technique to have when playing busy 16th note grooves.

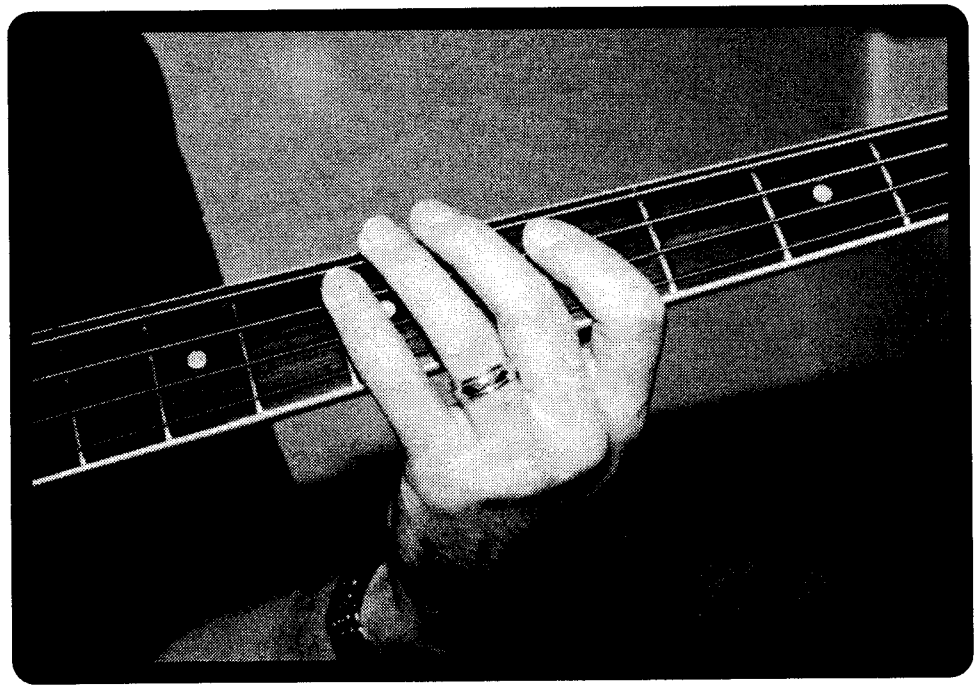




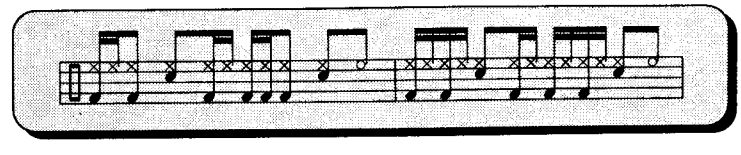
Your right hand should only play the rhythms that are written. Don't keep time by tapping the strings in between the notes that you are playing. There should be silence there for the drums.

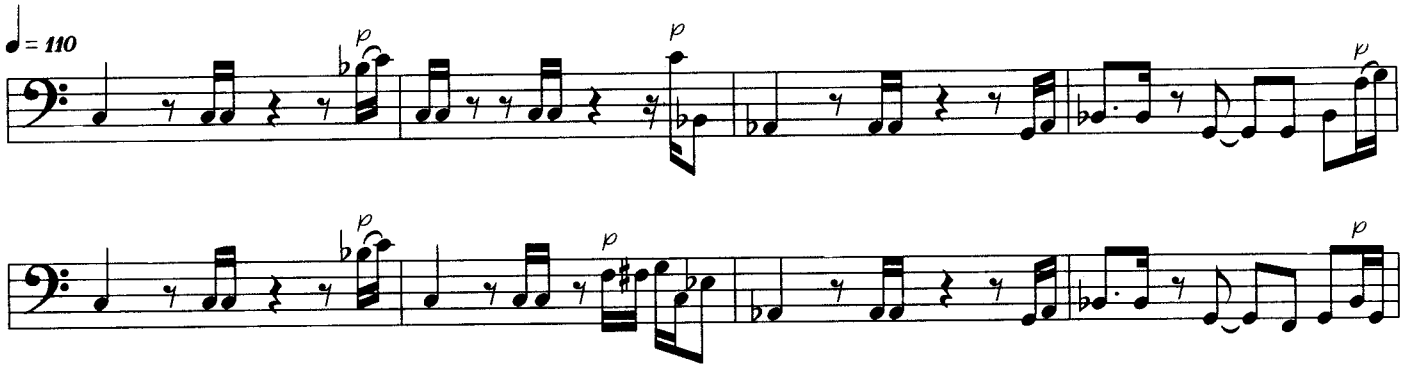




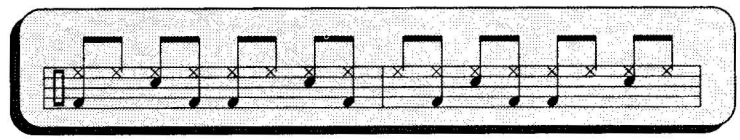


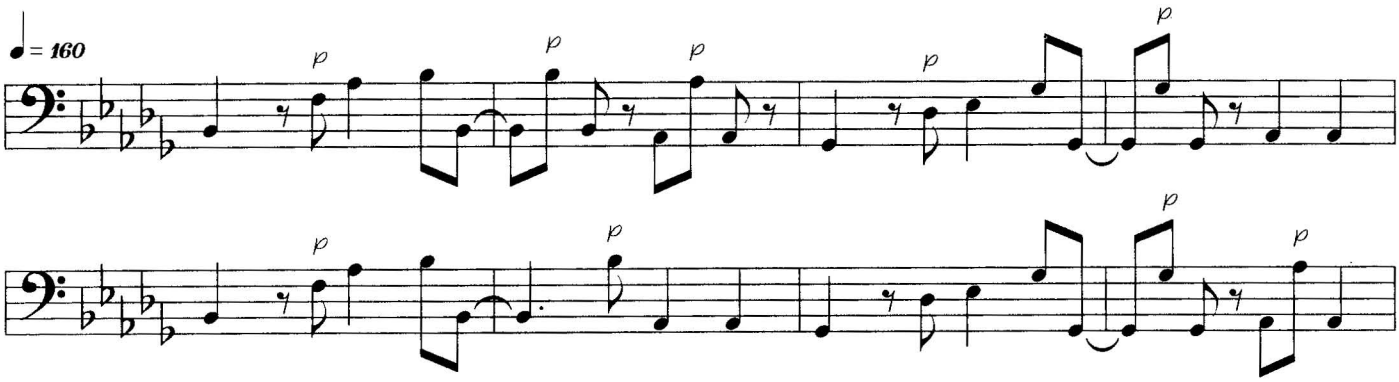
The sixth measure contains a fingering that is very awkward for most players. This is a good technique to add to your playing. The picture is showing my hand position when hammering on a whole step with my 1st and 4th fingers.



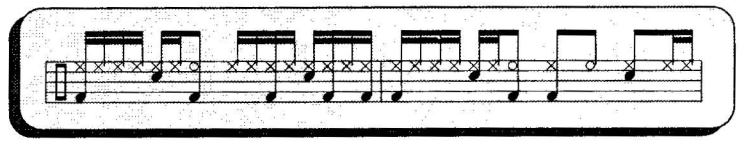


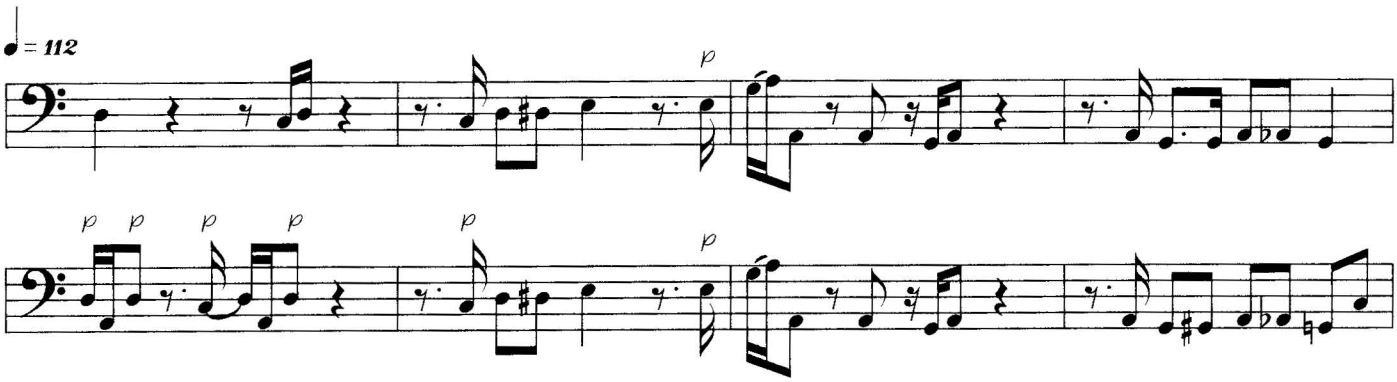
The difficulty in this groove is thumbing the high notes. Notice how it is still based around playing octaves. Playing the octave with your thumb gives it a different sound.



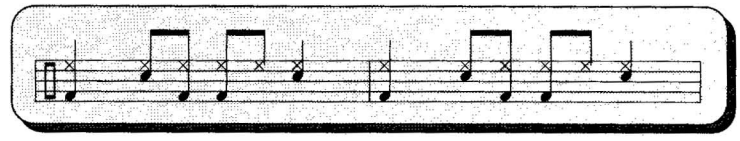


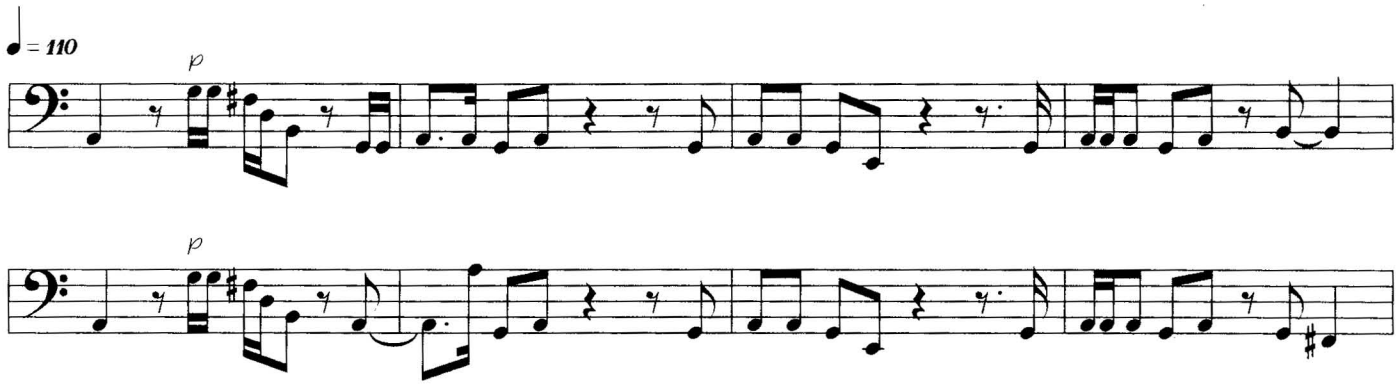
Spend some time practicing the fingerings in the fifth and sixth measures. It's difficult to get the time even when you're popping so many notes.



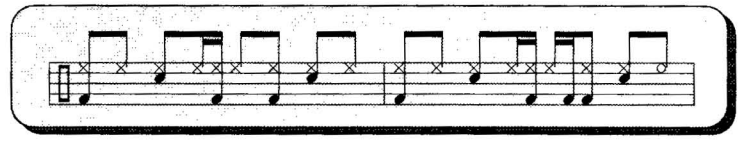


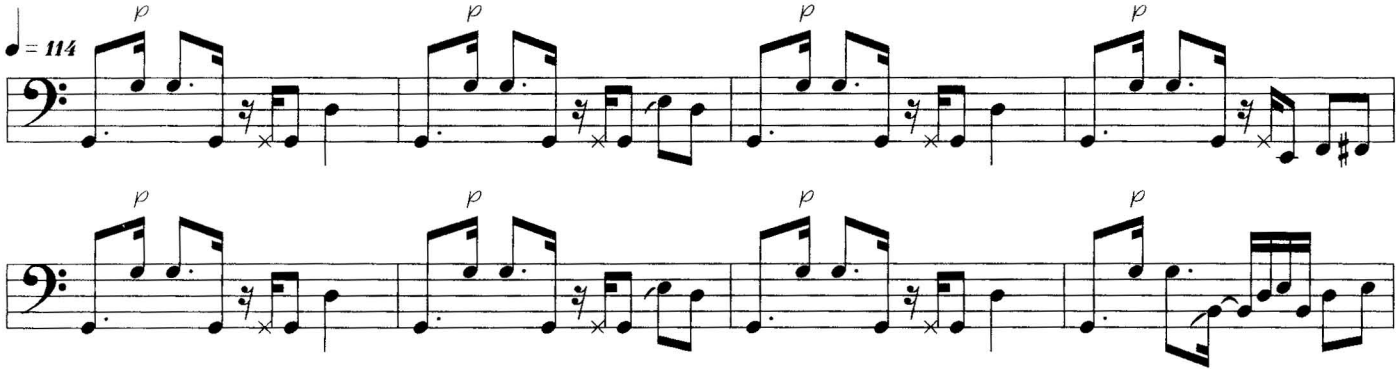
Practice the line in the first and the fifth measures very slowly. Get all the notes consistant with your thumb. It is very difficult to play this cleanly up to speed.



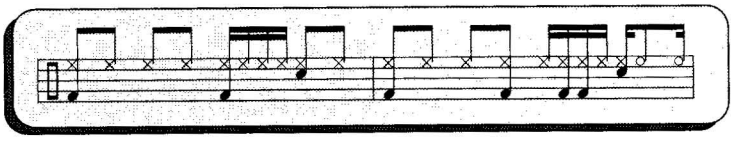


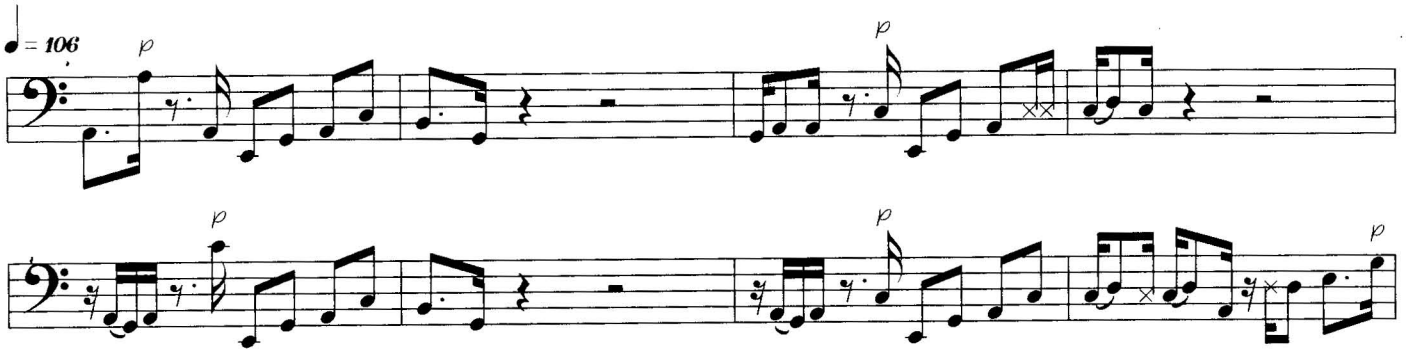
In this example, we are again playing the octaves by popping, then thumbing them. This technique should allow you to create different sounding lines of your own.



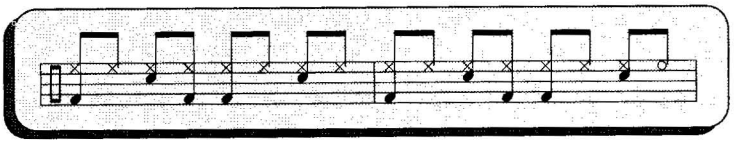


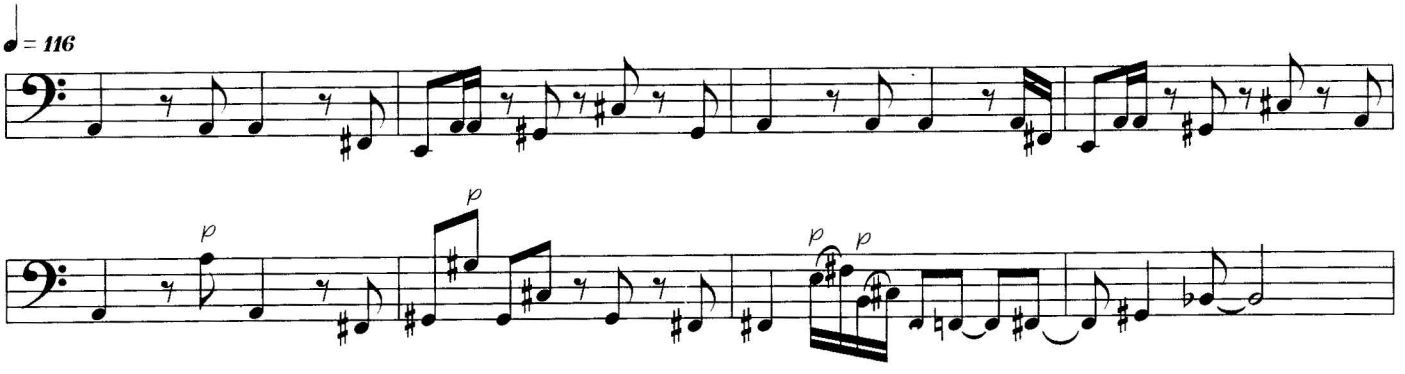
This groove has an example of pulling-off of notes (in the fifth and seventh measures). The C in the third and seventh measures is popped on the "A" string.



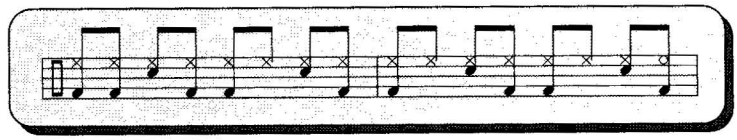


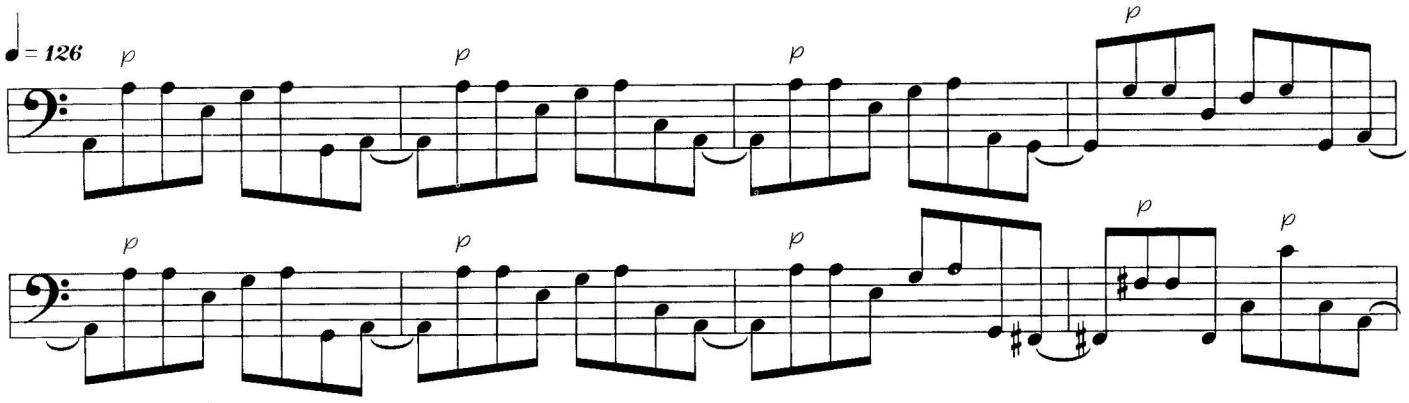
The 16th notes are deceivingly quick. It takes a lot of thumb speed to play this kind of line. The 16th notes should have a lot of definition.



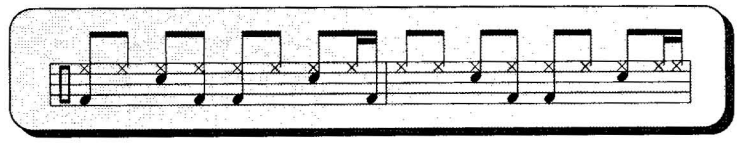


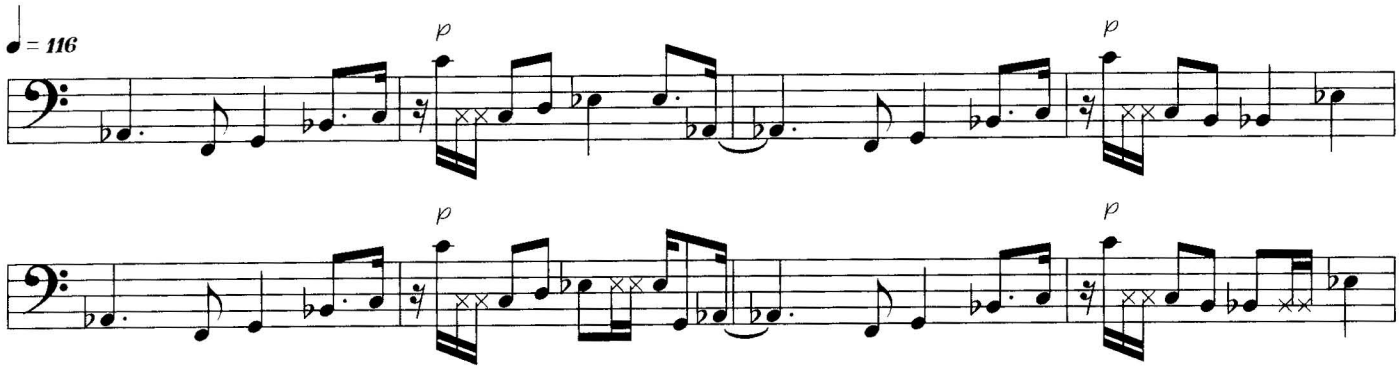
This is a good example of adapting a typical "synth" bass line to the electric bass using slap technique. I try to approach a line like this the way a keyboard player would play it.



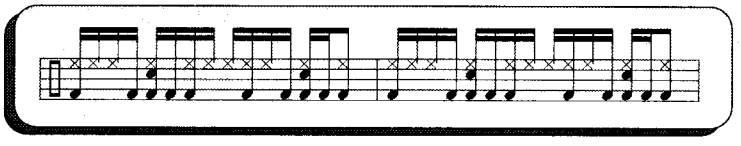


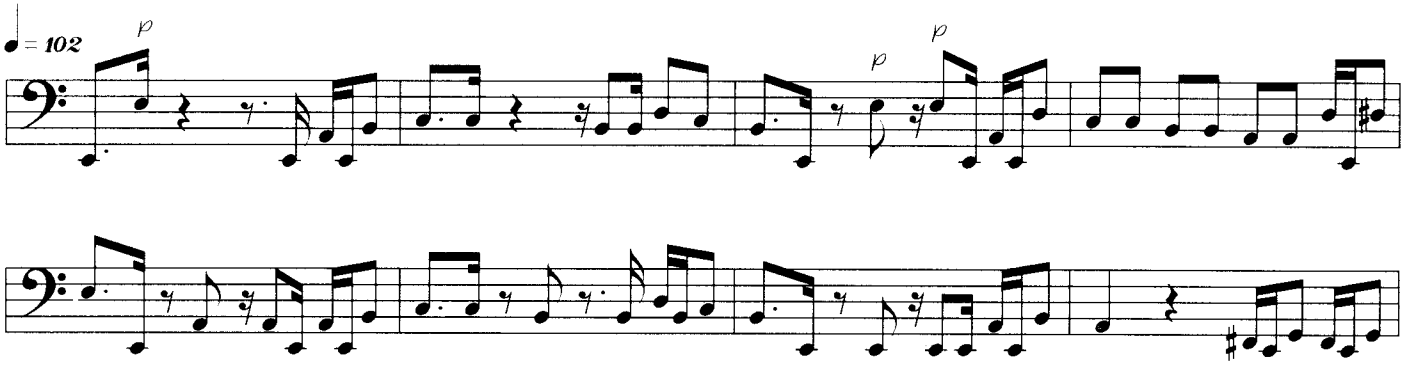
The 16th notes have to be played very straight and almost machine-like. I think the percussiveness of a groove like this can actually be more important than the pitch at times.



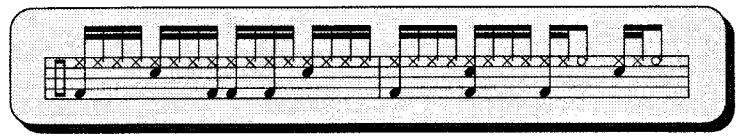


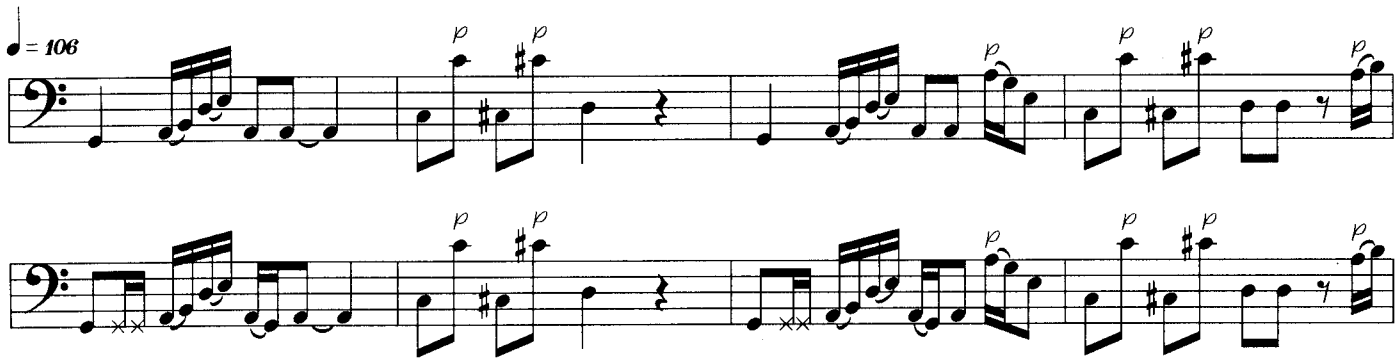
This line is a typical finger style funk groove that is being adapted to the slap style. The above picture is showing how I mute the strings with my forearm as I'm playing thumb bass lines.



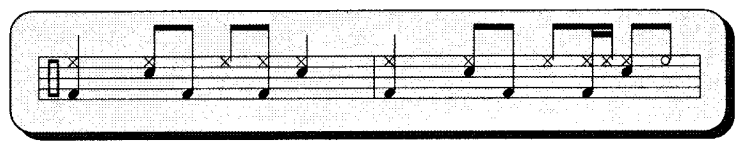


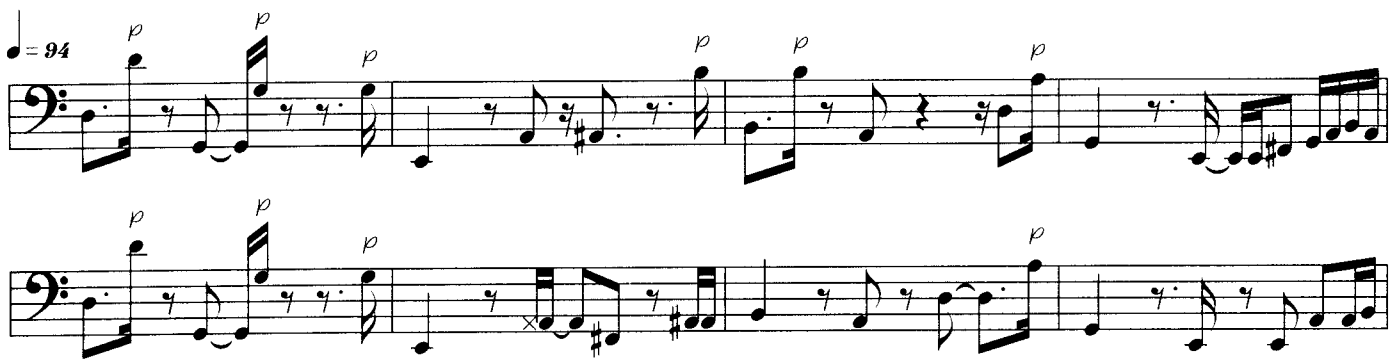
You can see how this line is still based on playing octaves. It also incorporates some early 70's thumb techniques. I've made the line sound a little more modern by popping the fourth beat in the third and seventh measures.



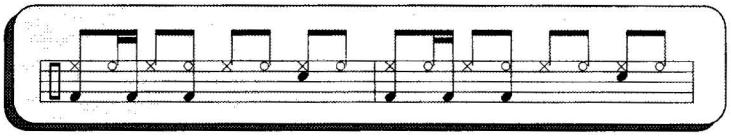


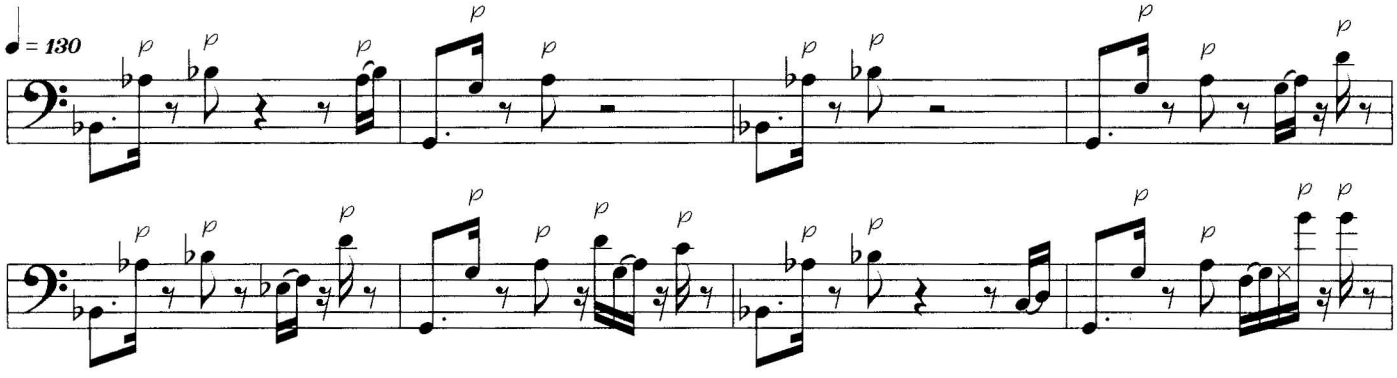
Play this line very slowly at first and make sure you play the rhythms exactly as written. Check your phrasing against the phrasing on the tape.



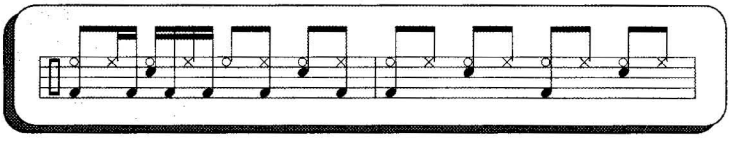


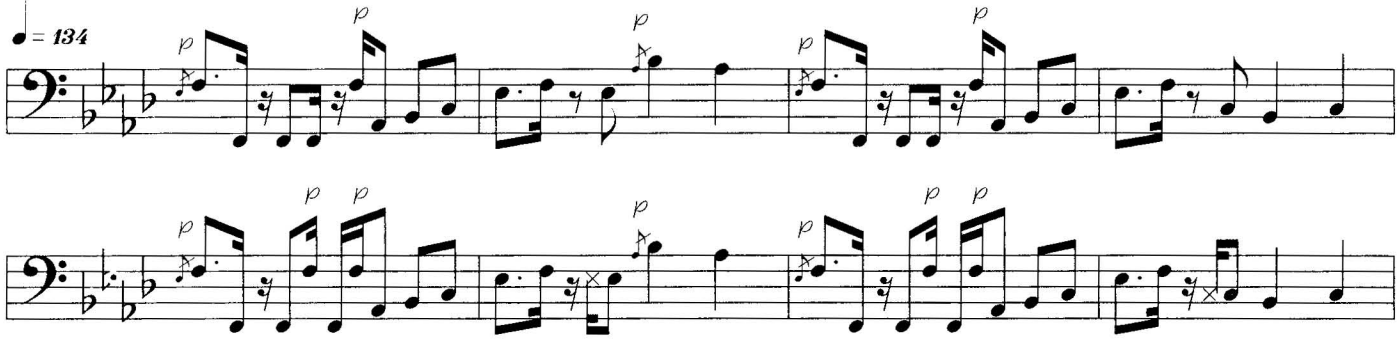
This is a fusion-sounding bass line. The tempo that it is to be played is what makes it very difficult. The notes are played very short, but not so short that you can't hear the pitch.



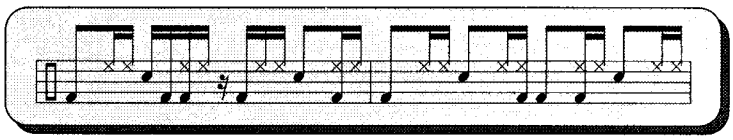


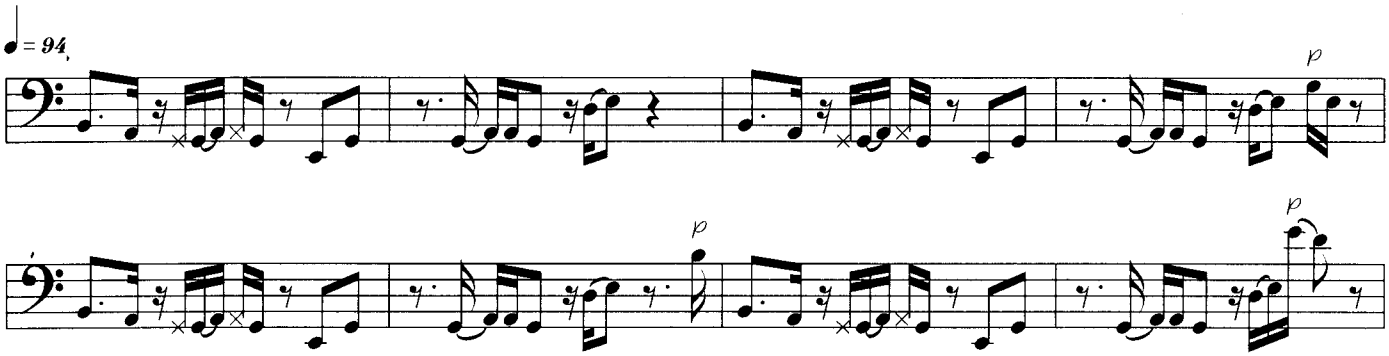
Work on getting the grace notes sounding just right. That means, not too short or not too long. The quarter notes are held long.



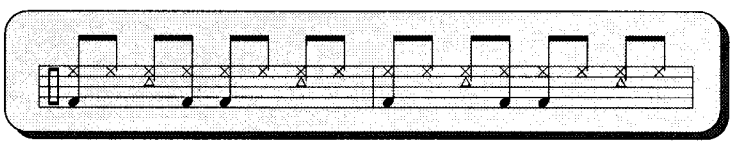


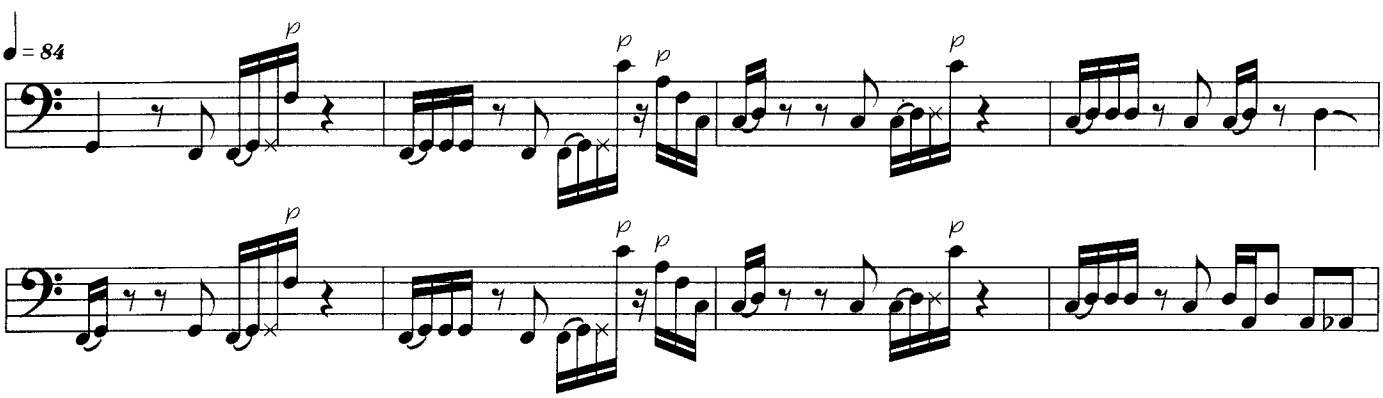
The main part of this groove is played on the "E" string. In the first two measures, only the D to E in the third beat of the second measure is played on the "A" string. This should help you get the sound of this line.



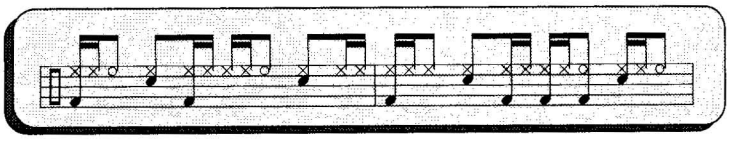


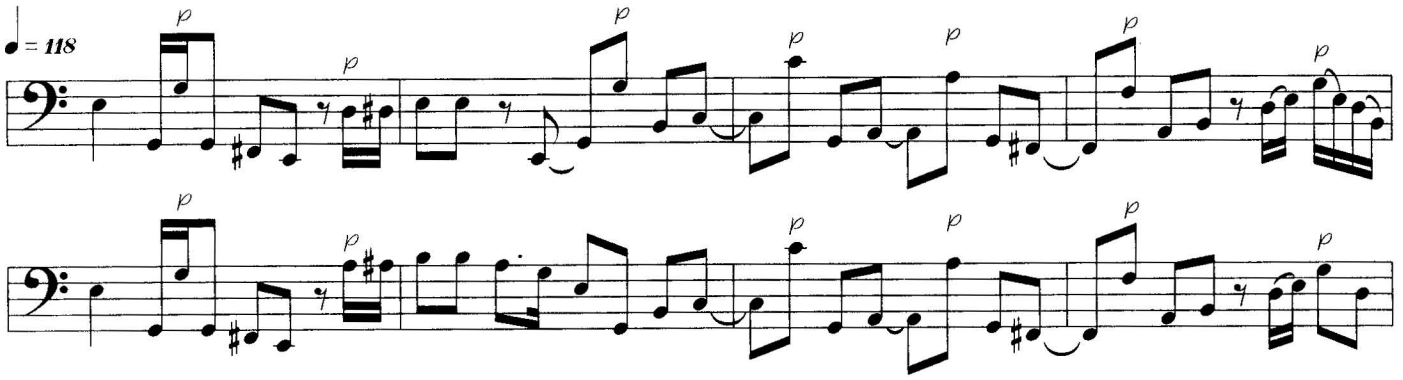
This groove contains a lot of 16th note hammered-on rhythms. Work on playing them perfectly even. Beat four of the second and sixth measures has a technique that you should work on getting consistant.



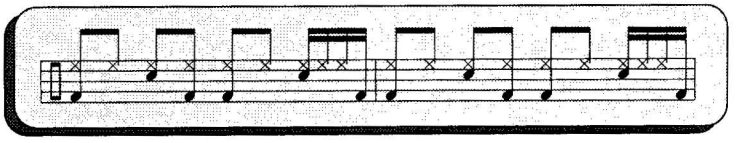


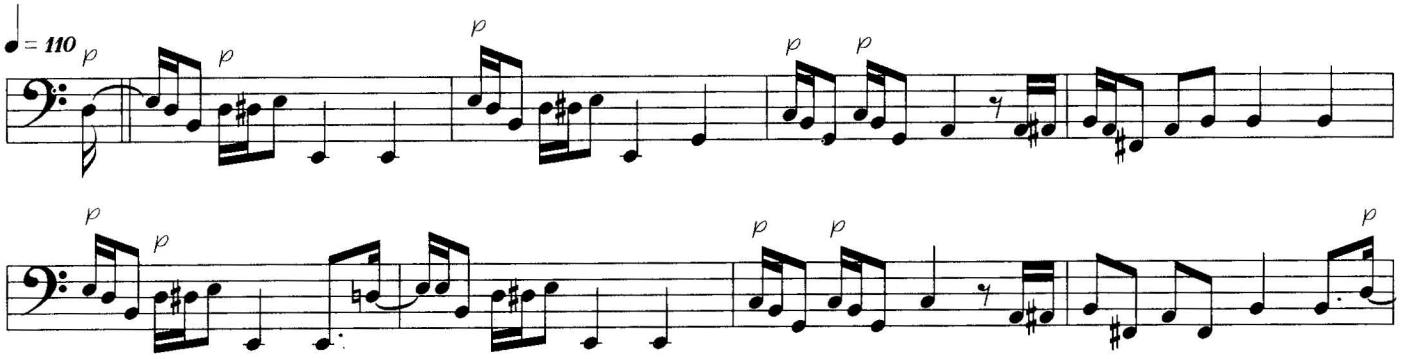
Pay particular attention to the fingerings in measures three and seven. The E in the first measure is being played on the "A" string. I do this because of the difference in tone.



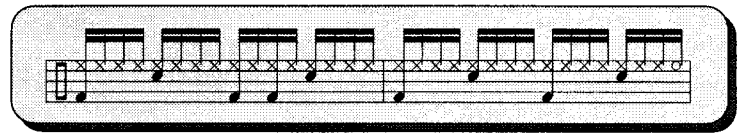


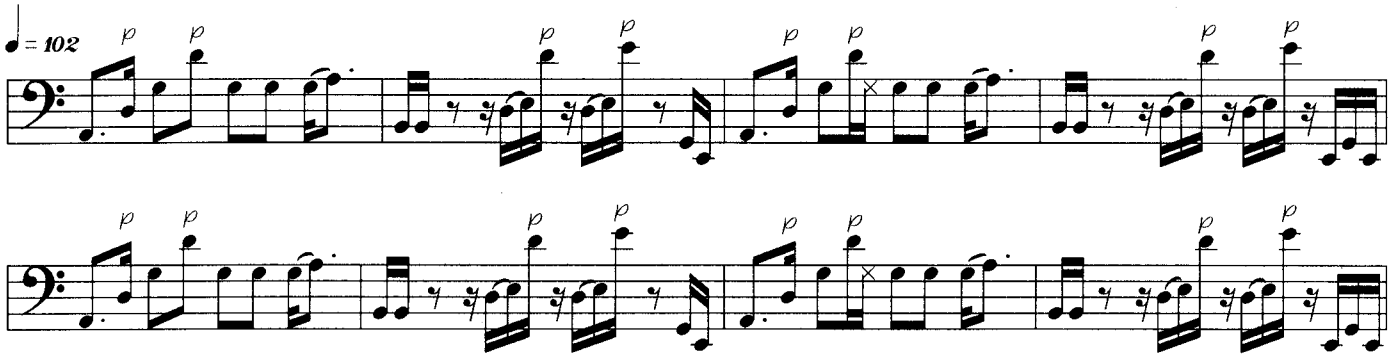
Here is another "synth" bass line that has been adapted to slap. This line requires a lot of thumb speed and accuracy. Play the notes short and at a consistant volume.



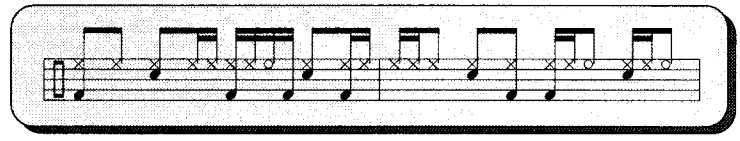


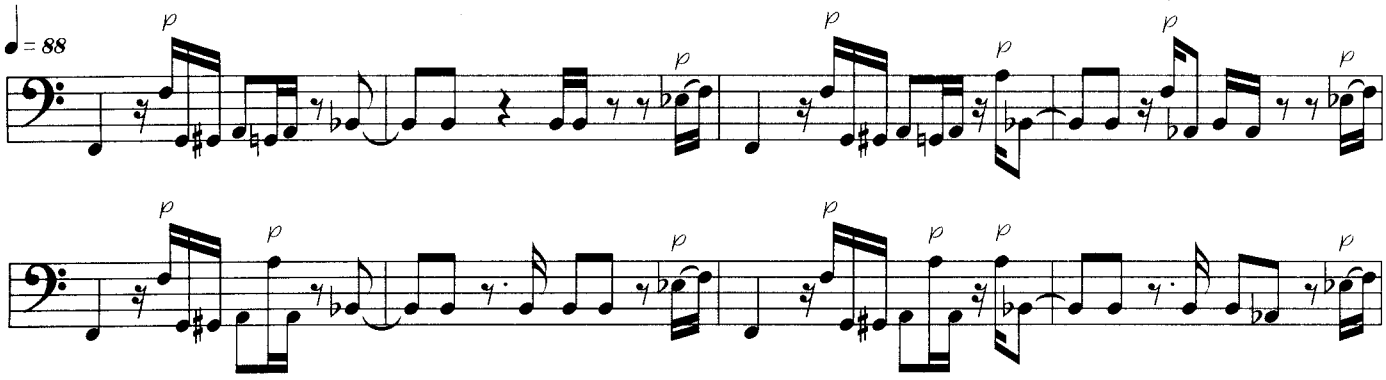
The first measure incorporates a technique of alternating between thumbing and popping the notes. In the second measure, hammer on the first D to E and slide from the D to the E on the fourth beat.



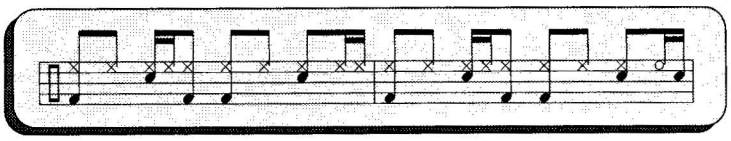


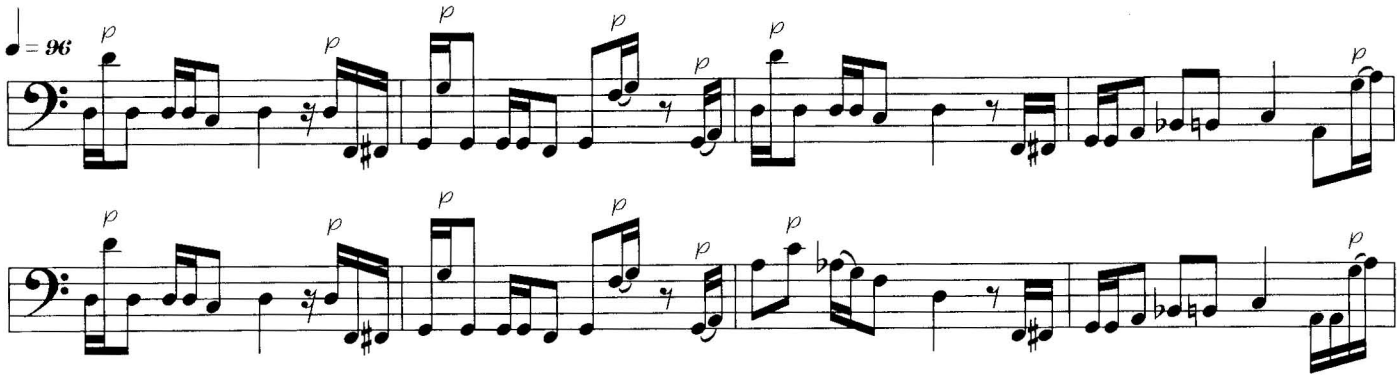
There is a slight variation of the groove in the third measure from the first measure. Notice how adding one note and changing a rhythm slightly can make a line much more difficult to play.



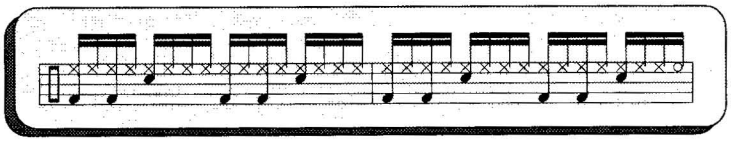


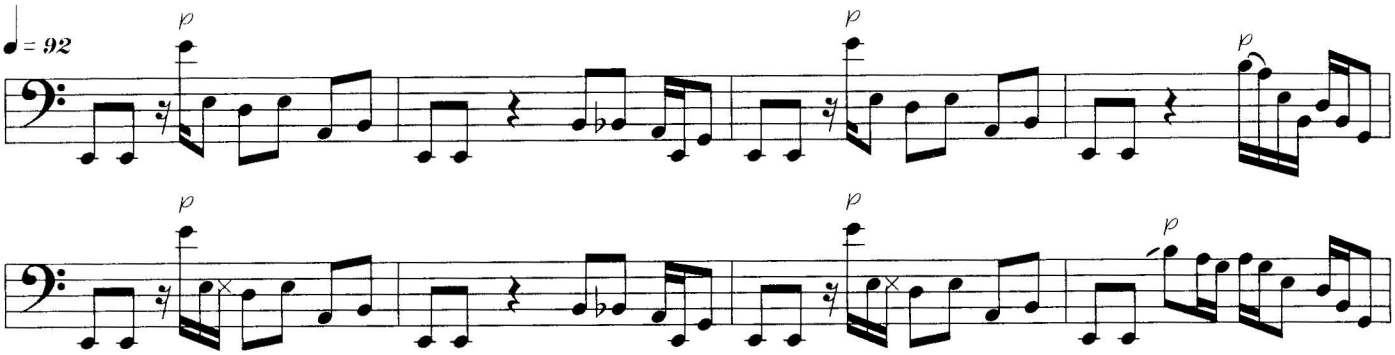
The grooves are getting more complex, but you can still see the influence of playing octaves within them. At the end of the first measure, the D is being popped on the "A" string. The A in the seventh measure is being played on the "D" string.



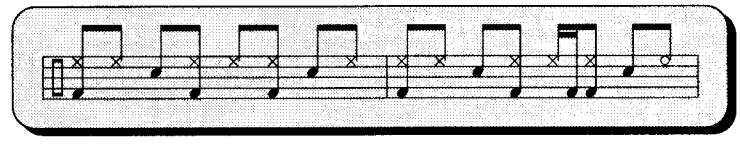


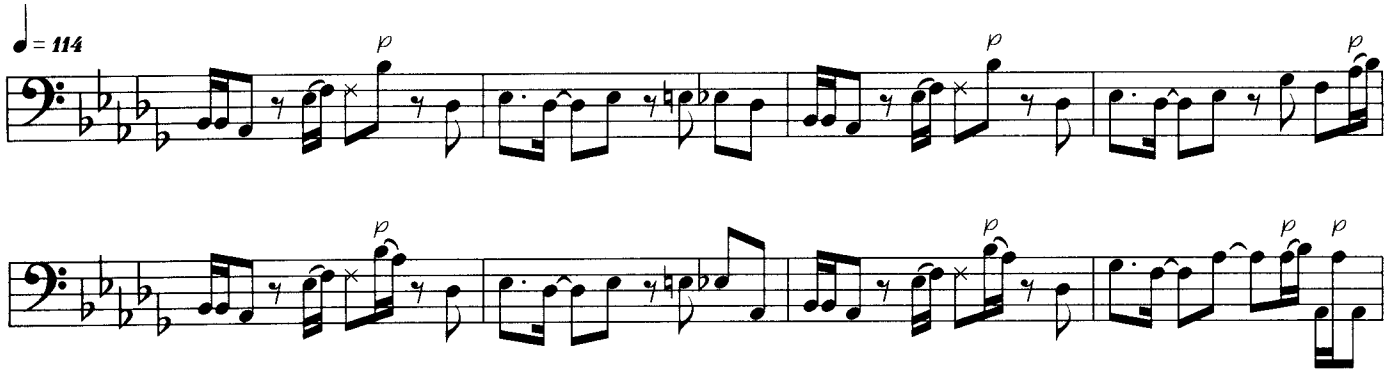
A slight variation on the first four measures make this groove a little more difficult when playing the last four measure. The fill in the fourth and eighth measures is being started on the "D" string at the ninth fret.



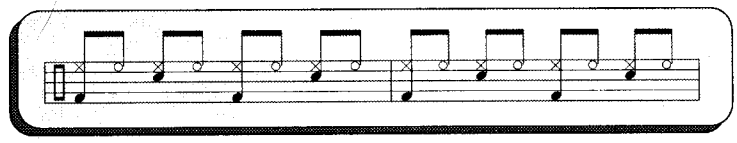


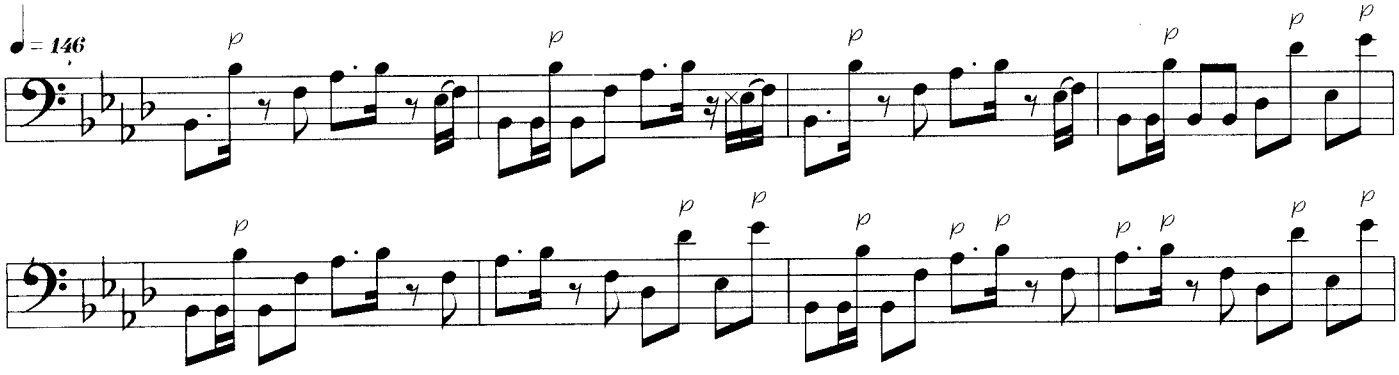
This picture is showing my fingering for lines that contain root, 5th and octave. Notice my third finger covers the 5th In the line below, experiment with playing the Bb to Ab between the "A" & "E" strings, or all on the "E" string. When you do this, notice the difference in tone when playing the smae thing on different strings.



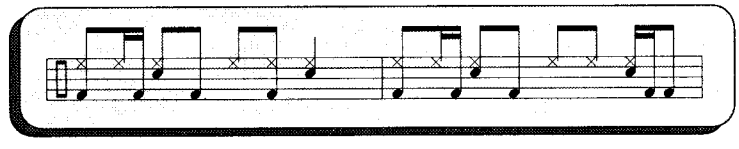


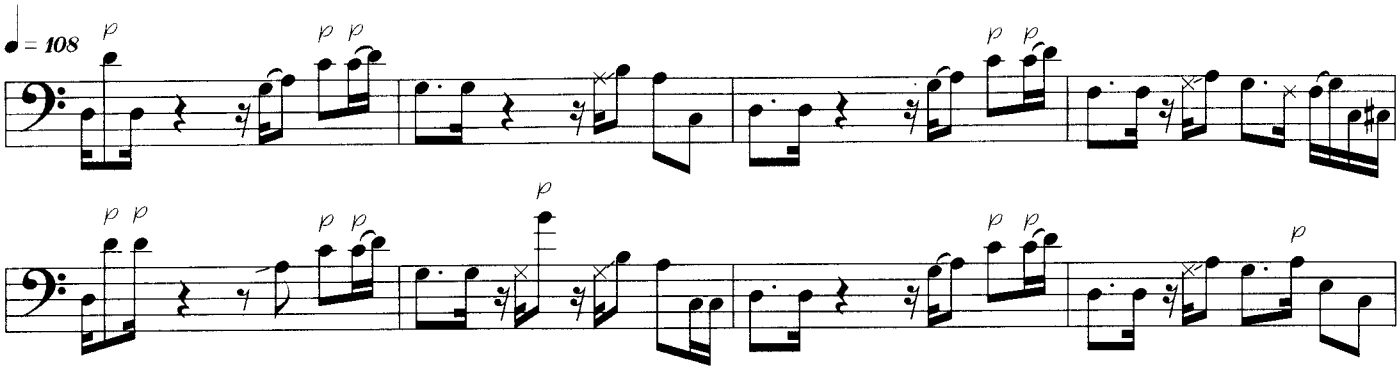
I'm playing the Bb on the 6th fret of the "E" string. This way I am set up better to play the Db to Eb octaves in the upcoming measures.



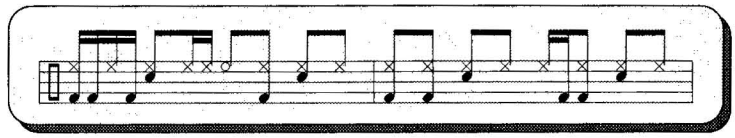


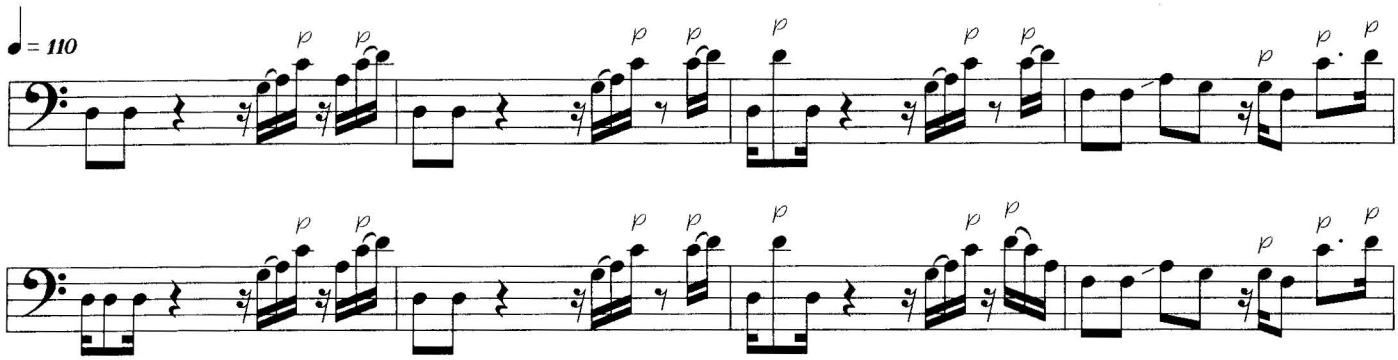
There are a few slides within this groove. Work on getting them smooth and in time. Playing them wrong can really make the feel suffer. Also, get the transition in the 6th measure smooth.



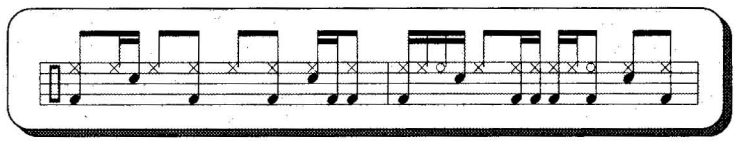


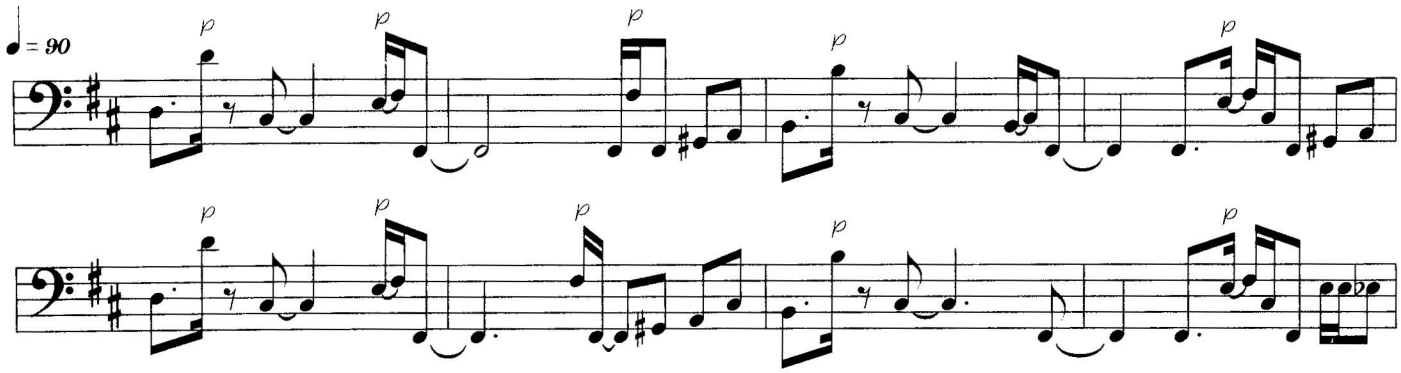
This line is very similar to the previous one, except that this groove has more of a 16th feel. It also involves hammering on more notes.



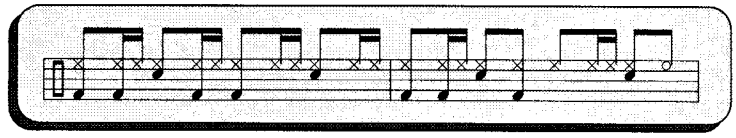


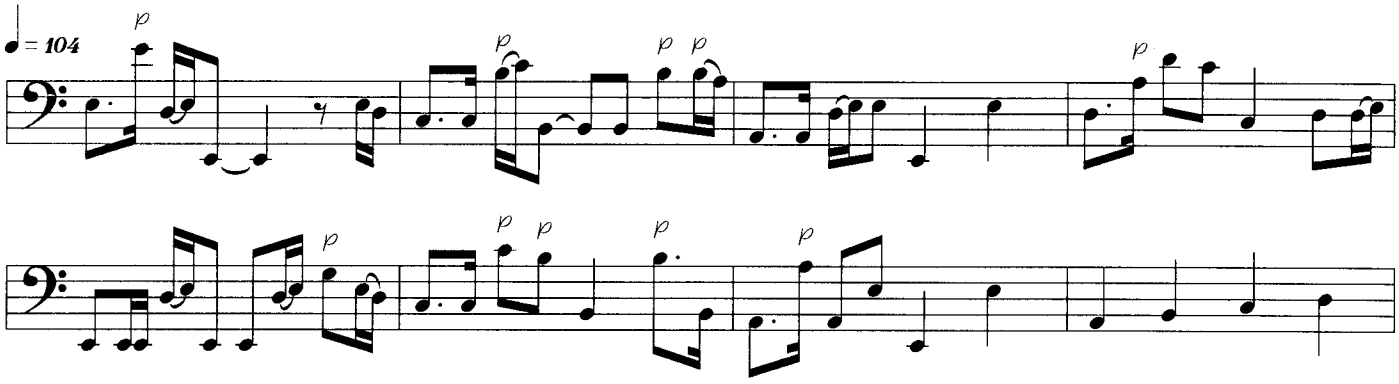
This line contains a lot of anticipations. Count it out slowly and make sure you are playing the right rhythms. Pay particular attention to your fingerings in the 4th and 8th measures.



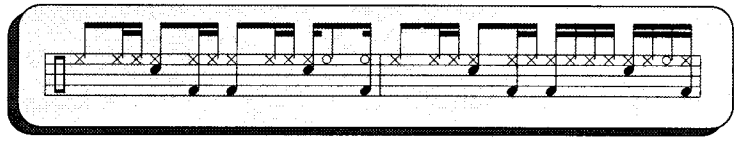


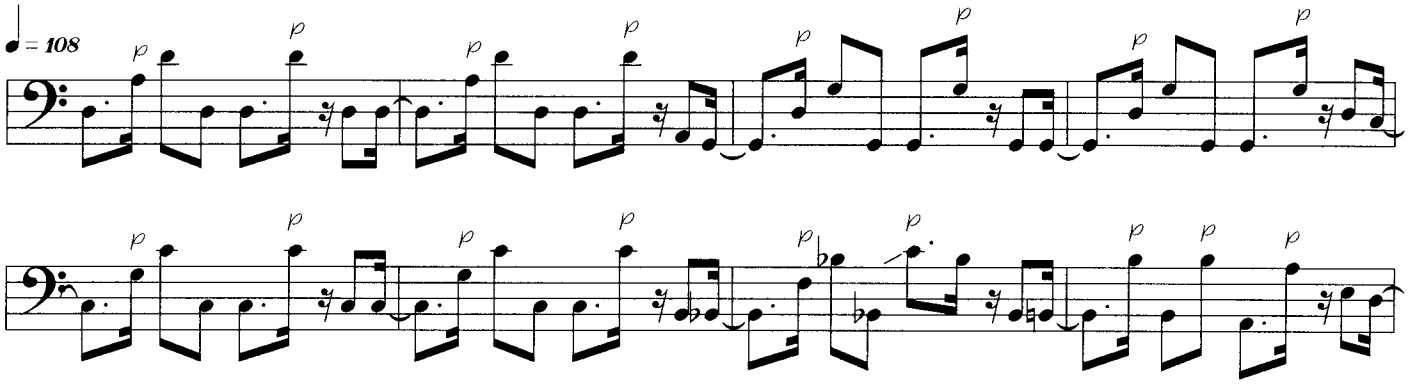
This groove contains both hammer and pull-offs. In the 2nd measure, you will be popping from the Maj 7th to the root. Work out a fingering that is comfortable for you.



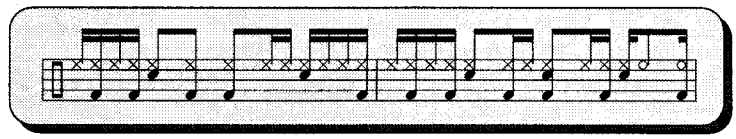


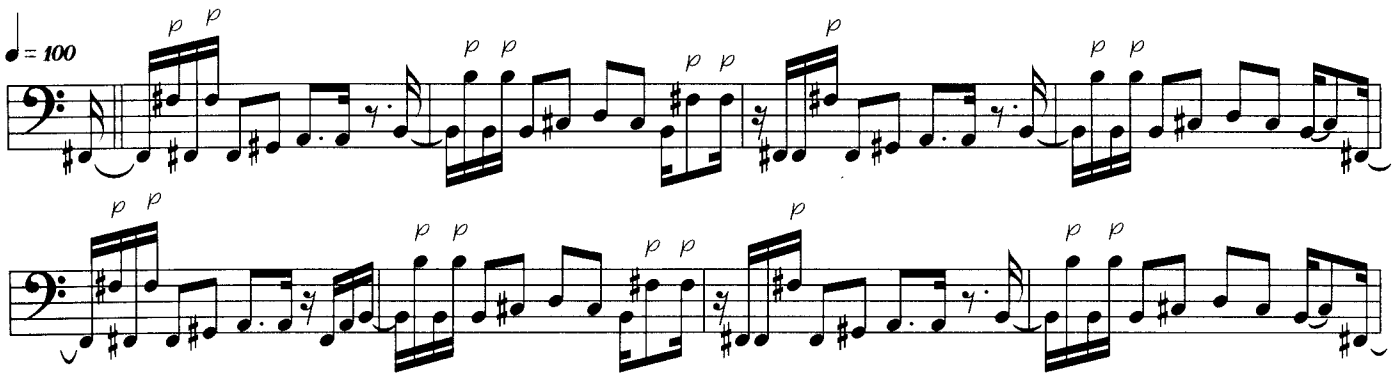
This line is basic root, 5th, octave. The difficulty is in the fingering I want you to use. Make sure the rhythms are smooth and consistant.



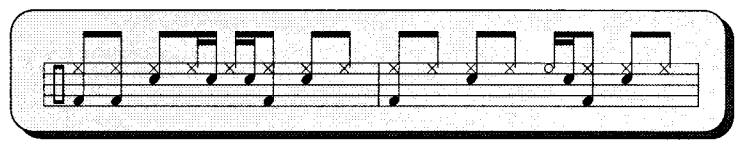


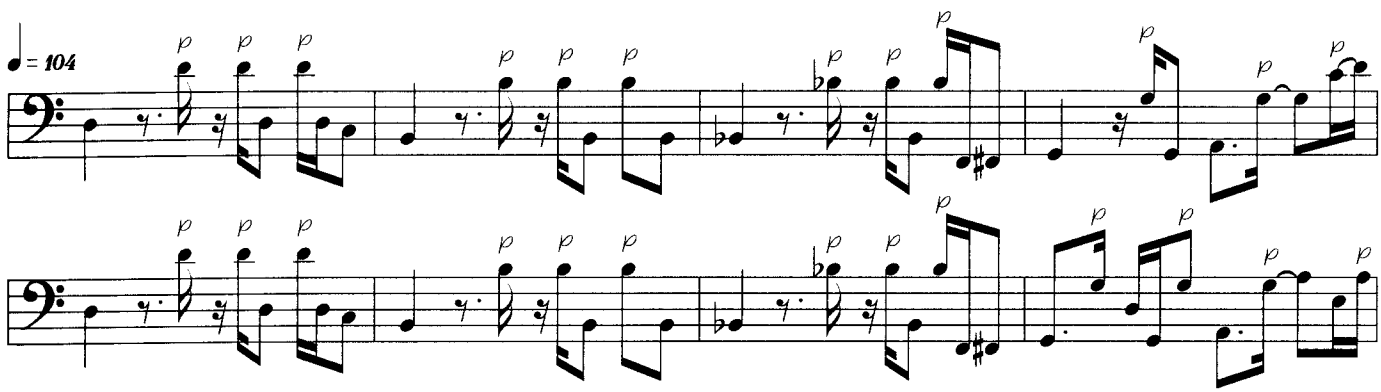
This is a good example of a busy line. But it grooves because it is consistant. Notice how a little variation in the fifth measure makes quite a difference.



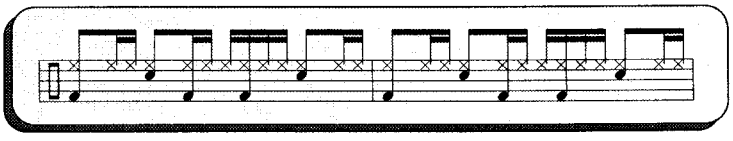


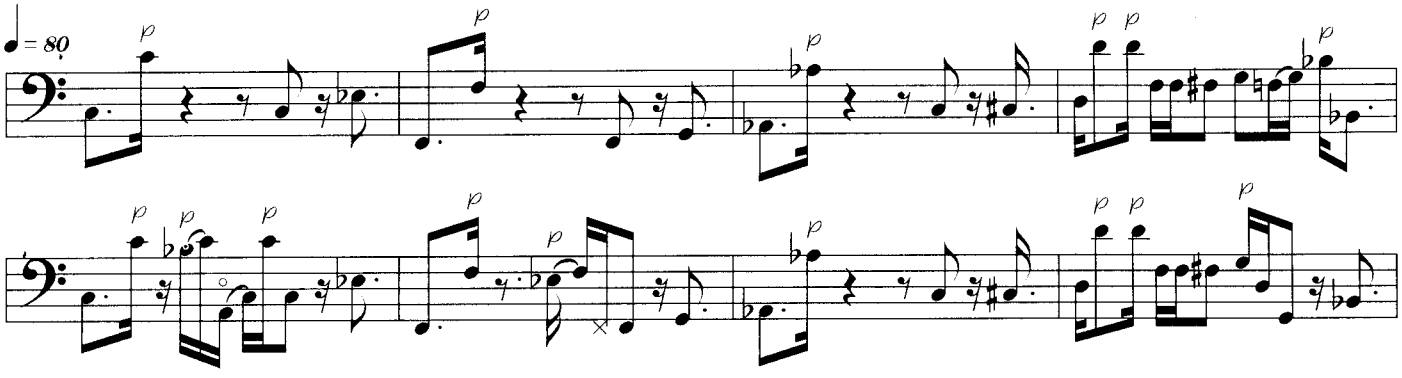
Most of the rhythms are off the beat in this line. After you get a feel for the first measure, it should come to you fairly easily. Work on the fingering in the fourth and eighth measures.



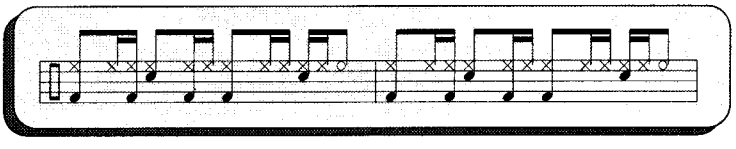


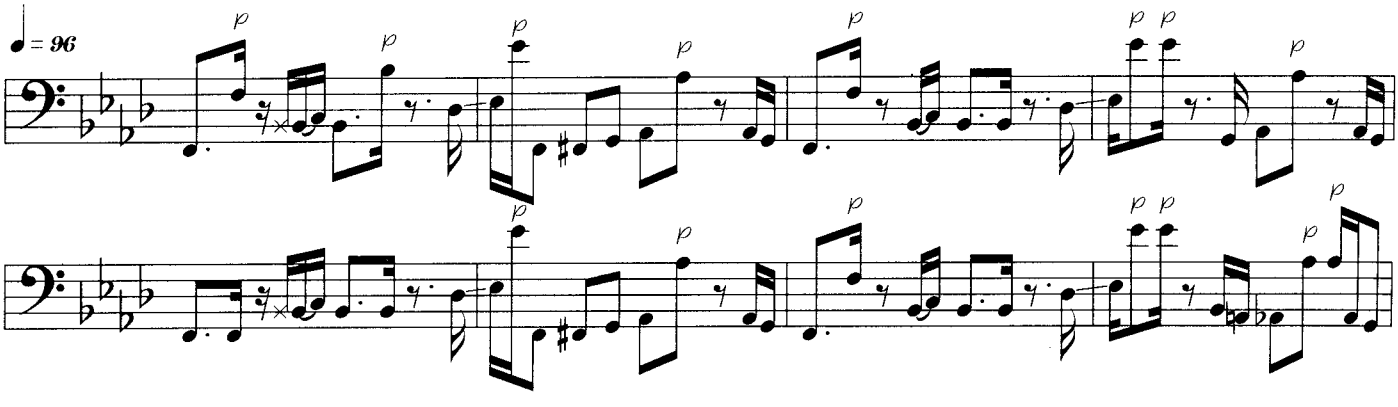
If you look at this line closely, you will see the basic groove underneath. There is quite a bit of improv within this line. You should practice embellishing the basic feel with some of your own fills.



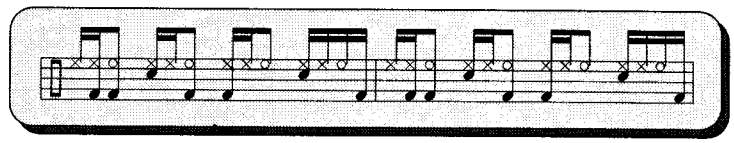


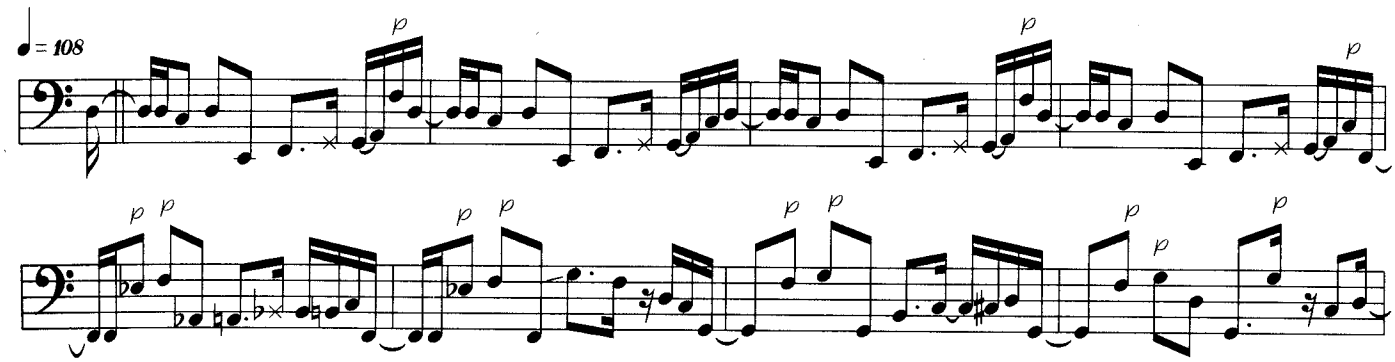
Take your time working this line out. There are difficult rhythms and it involves a bit of moving around on the bass. You will find it is hard to get a good slap sound high on the bass.



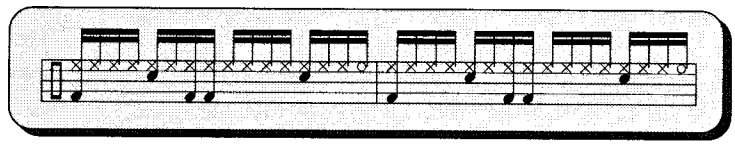


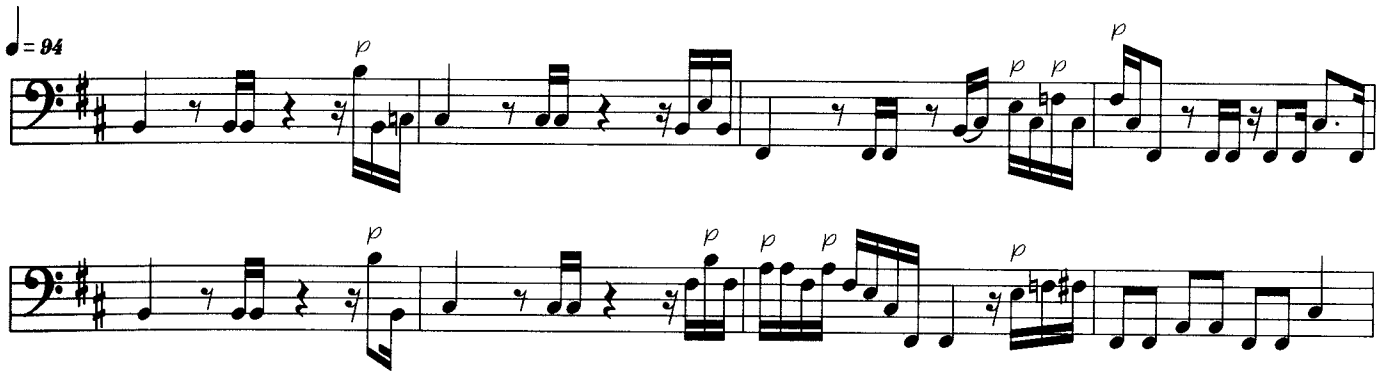
There is not much room for improv here. Try playing this groove for a few minutes straight without making a mistake. Your focus should always be on consistancy.



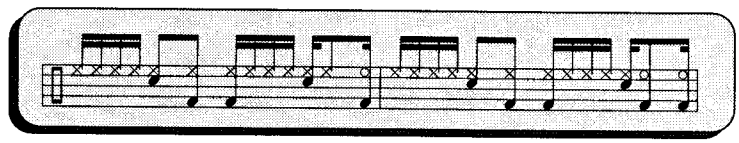


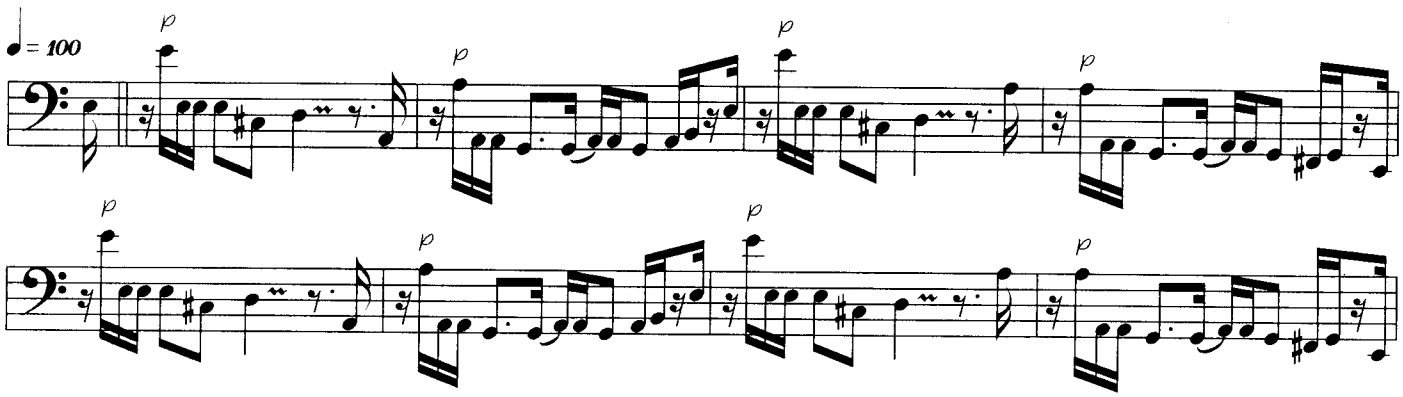
The difficulty in this groove lies in the fill in the sixth and seventh measures. Make sure you can hear all the pitches clearly and that you do not ghost the notes.



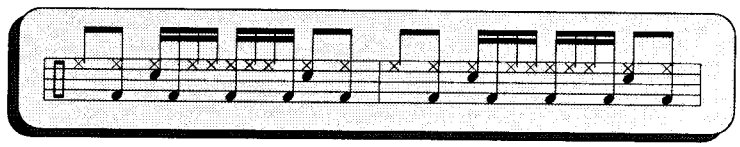


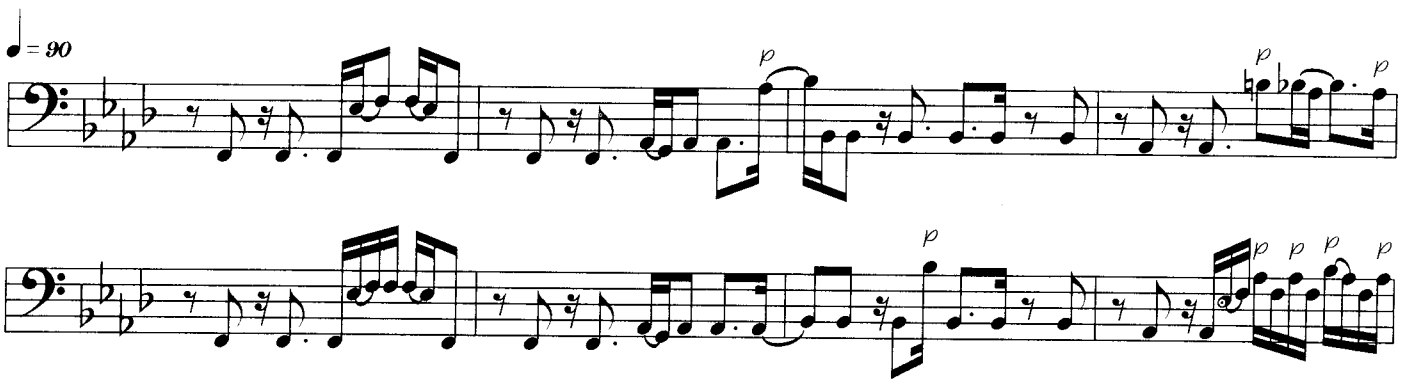
Most players have trouble getting the 16th notes at the beginning of all of the measures perfectly even. Even though the notes are quick, make sure there is a clear definition between them.





Make sure you play the first and fifth measures all with your thumb as notated. Work on getting the 16th notes very even in the eighth measure. Notice the use of hammer-on's and pull-off's.



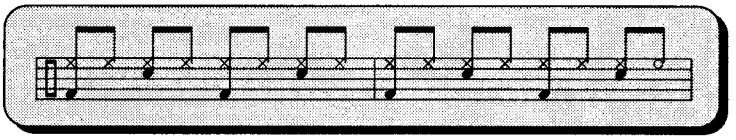


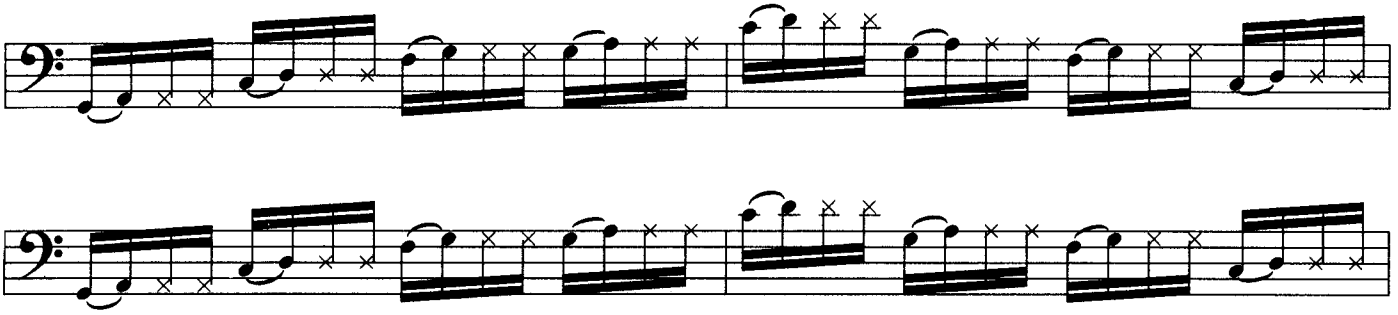
Thumb Grooves

All of the grooves in this section of the book are played solely with your thumb. For me, the root of this kind of playing goes back to the early to mid 80's when is seemed like every other funk tune had a synth bass playing the tracks. At that time I was debating on whether I should double on synth bass. I then realized I could get a similar sound by playing with my thumb and adding some effects like chorusing or flanging. This worked out really well for a lot of those tunes from that era. At the same time, I was able to develop a lot of thumb speed and control. I think the real "funk" comes from the ability to thumb bass lines. I look at the popping of notes more as accents.

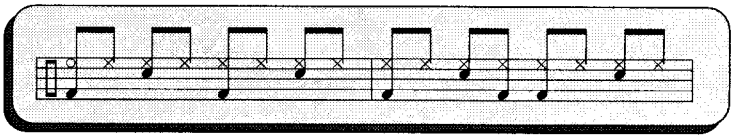
Take your time, play the grooves slowly and make sure your sound is consistent volume-wise across all the strings. Use a combination of your left and right hand to mute the strings you're not playing. Muting is half the battle when playing slap bass lines.

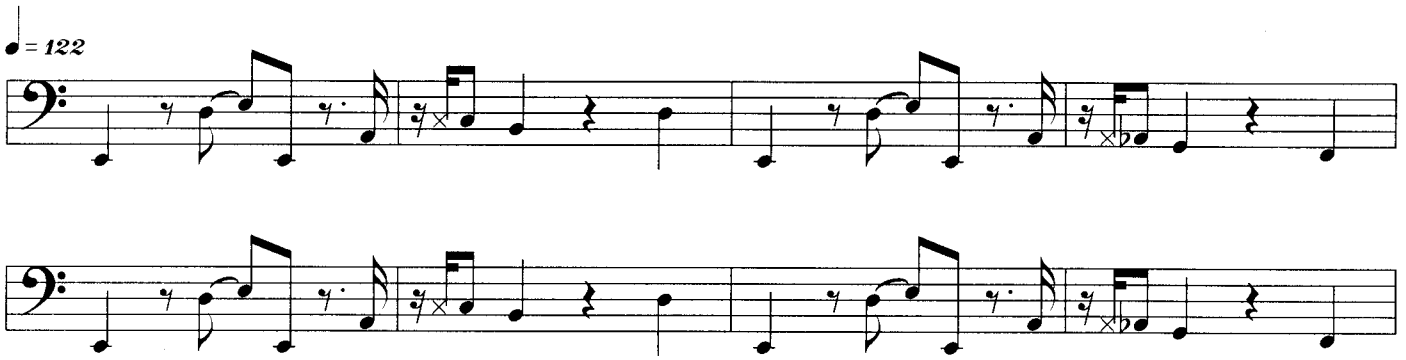
This is a basic thumb exercise that I use when starting players. In the picture above, you can see that I thumb the notes on the first fret. For a fatter sound, try thumbing the notes just off the fingerboard.



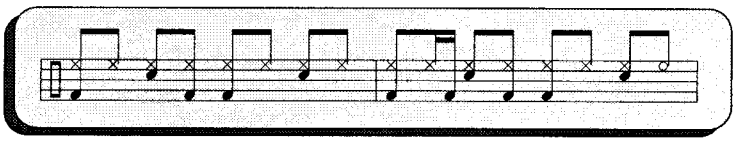


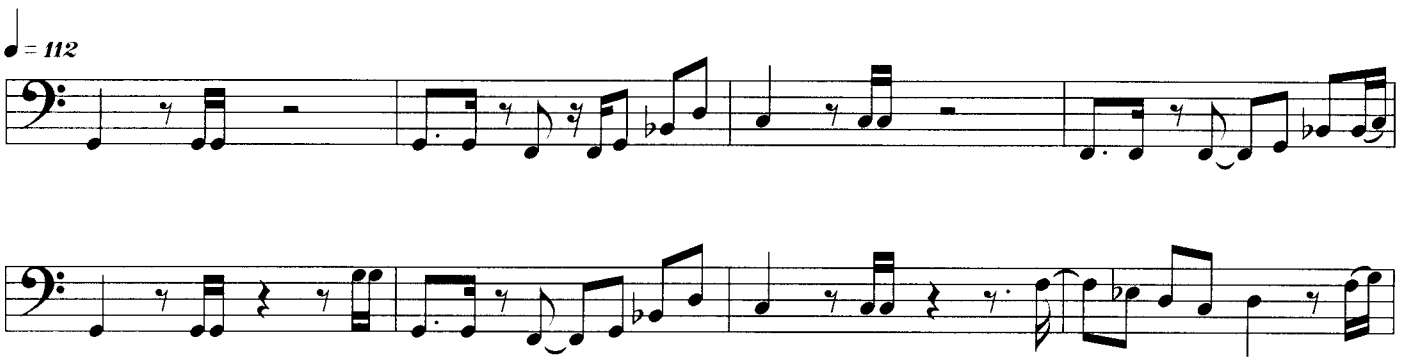
This is a fairly simple groove; just to get you used to playing lines with your thumb. Make sure the time is solid.



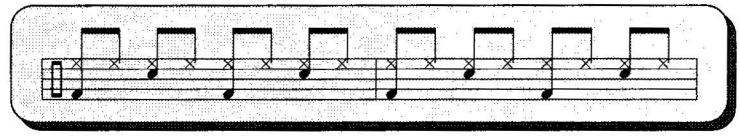


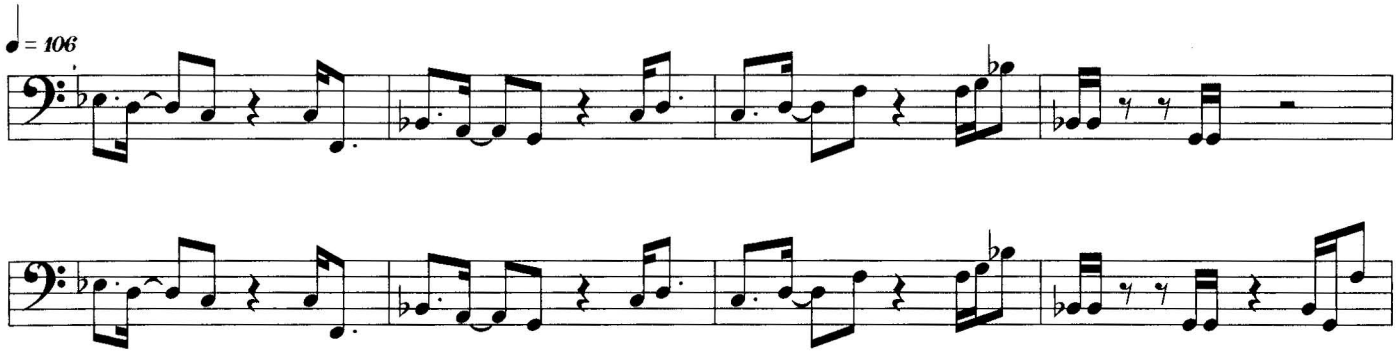
Work on getting a nice full sound. Players tend to get more rhythmic sounds and not enough pitch. Get the action on your bass set so that it's not too high. The higher it is, the more force it takes to get the note to the fret.



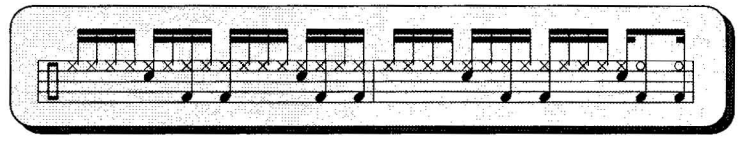


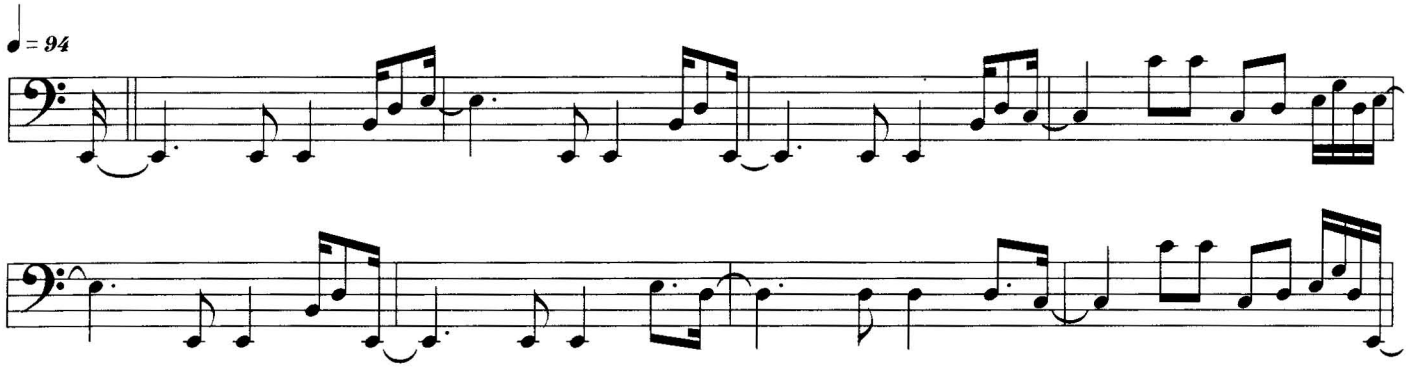
In these lines, you are going to get practice thumbing on all the strings. It's hard to get the same volume and tone out of your "G" string as opposed to your "E" string.



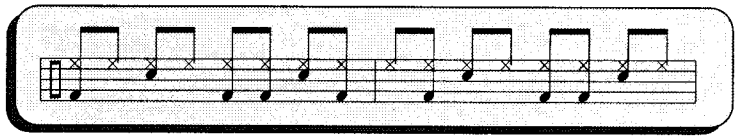


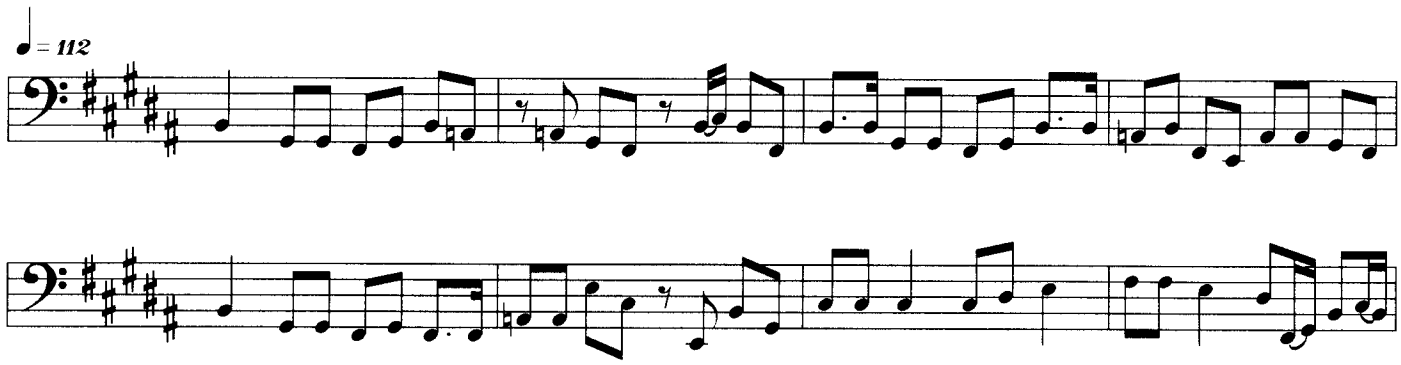
Notice that every measure is anticipated. It would help you if you could program a drum machine with just the rhythms to a percussive sound. Then try to play exactly on it, so you can sense where the rhythms are.



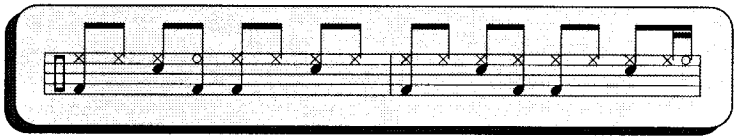


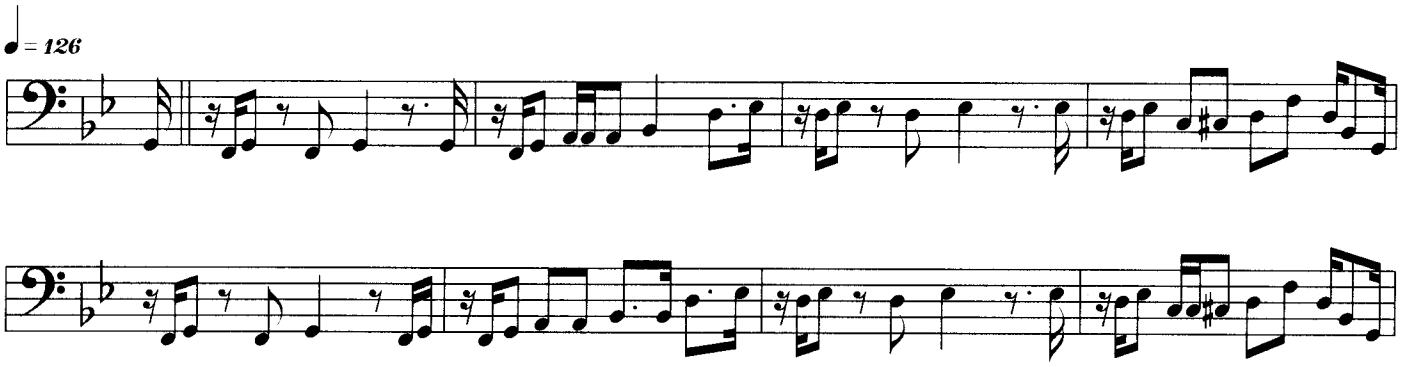
Pay attention to the key signature. It's good practice to play and read in keys you do not often see. Keep the 8th notes very straight and steady.



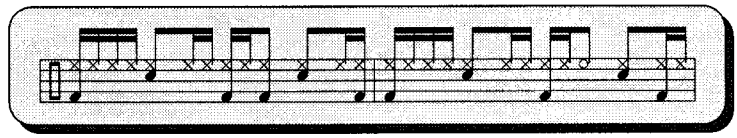


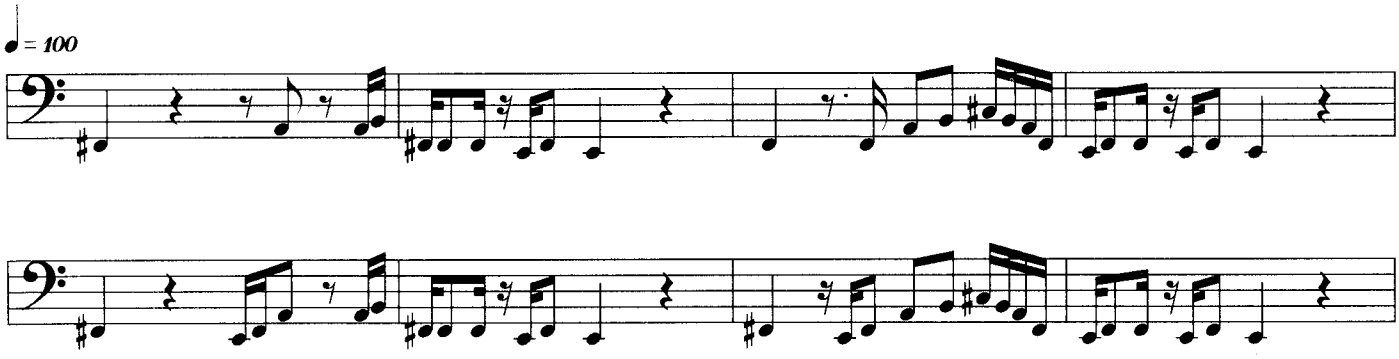
With this groove, we are going to start getting a lot more syncopation. Practice slowly, and make sure you play the 16th notes aggressively.



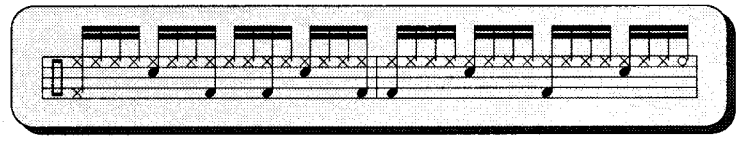


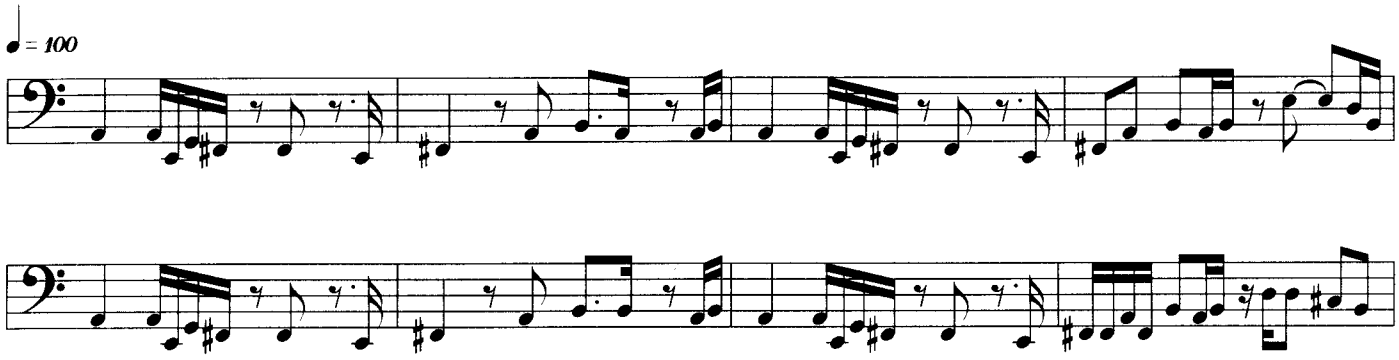
When you play a quarter note like in the first measure, you should be careful not to hold it over into the second beat. The snare drum should sound alone. This will make your lines groove harder.



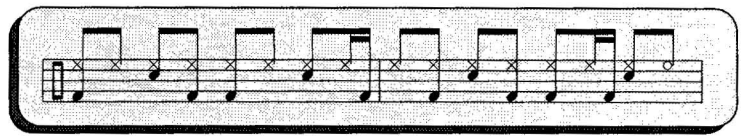


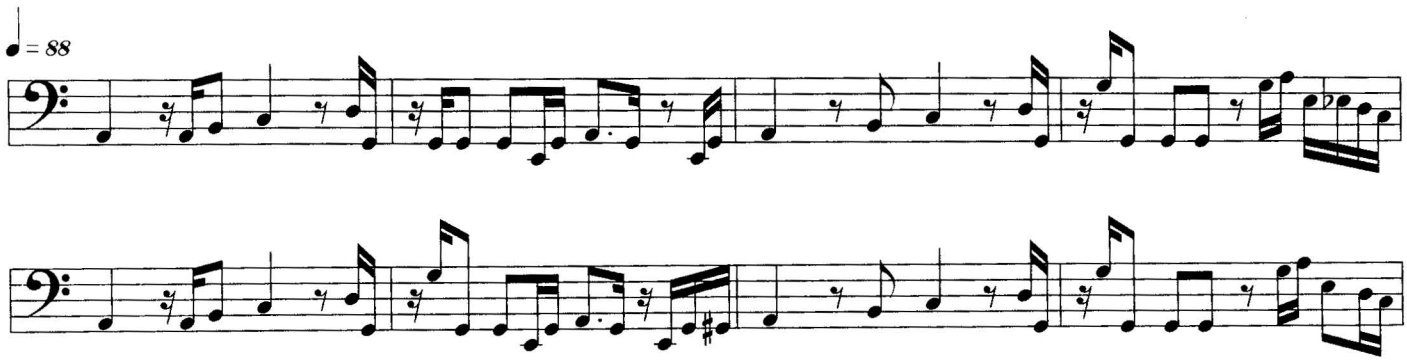
I am not a big fan of playing open strings in the slap style, unless there is a particular sound I am going for. I find them hard to control and the tone is very different from the fretted note.



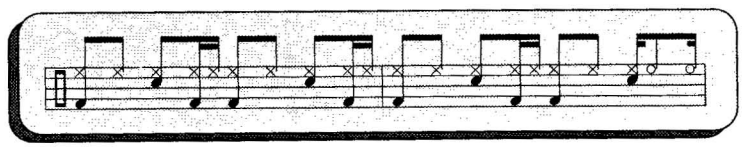


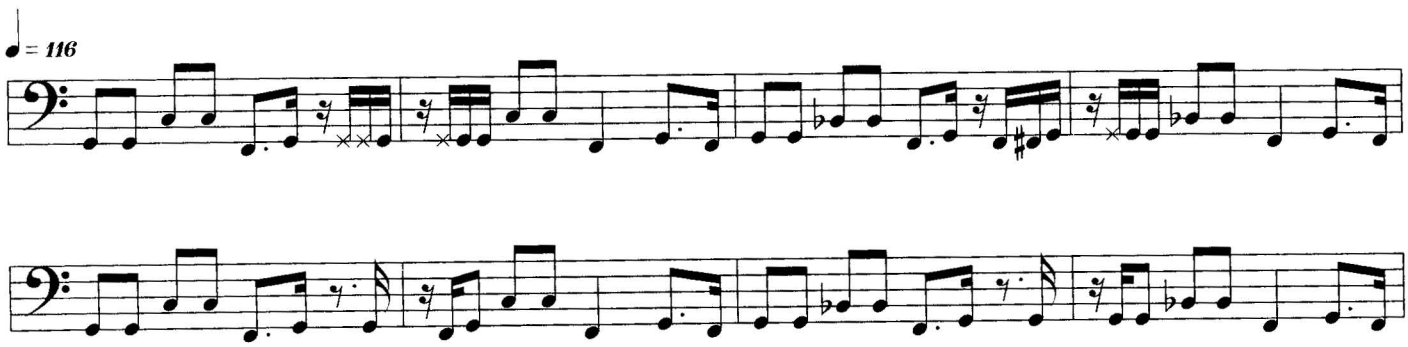
Like the previous groove, I am not playing any open strings in this line (except the "E", of course). Work on your technique playing the octaves in measures four and eight.



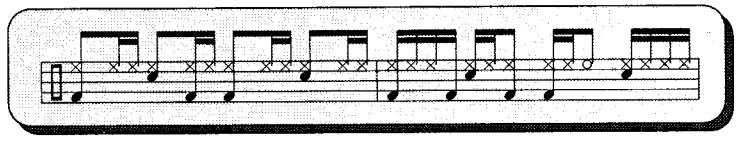


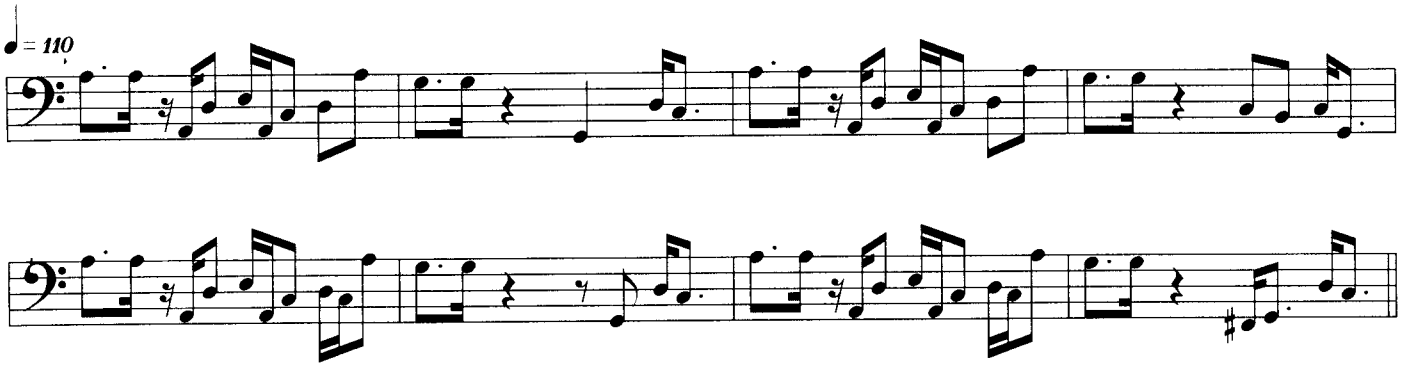
In this line, we have an example of some ghosted notes. Remember, the rhythms are just as important as the pitches. Volume-wise, they should be the same.



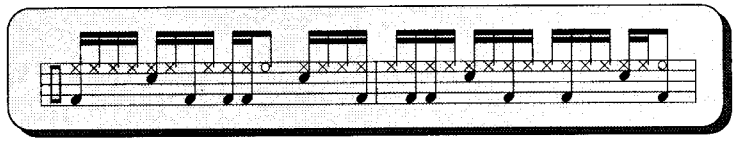


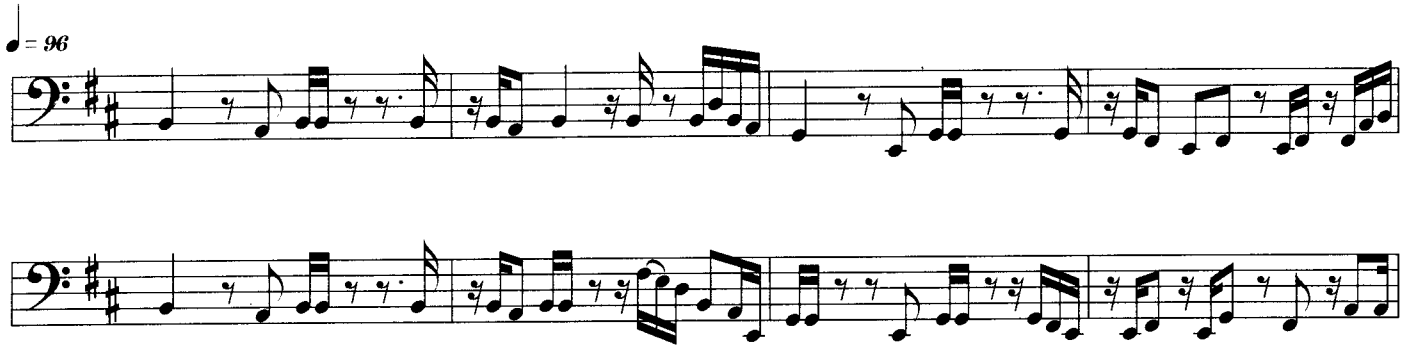
There is some fairly difficult thumbing involved in this line. For me, playing 4th's is one of the most difficult aspects of thumbing basslines.



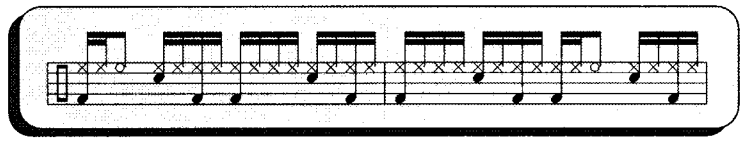


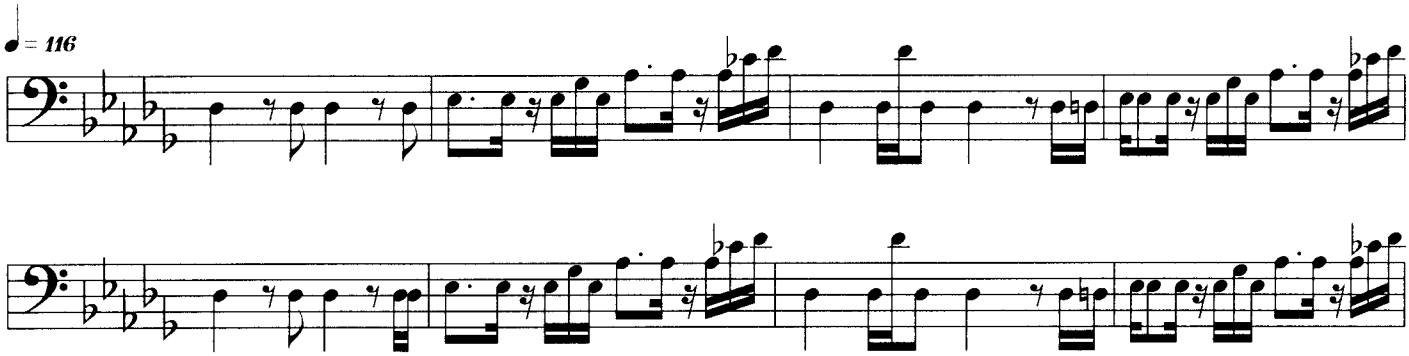
In this example, I am playing the A in the first and fourth measures open. The D in the second measure is being fretted. Make sure to play the pull-off notated in the sixth measure.



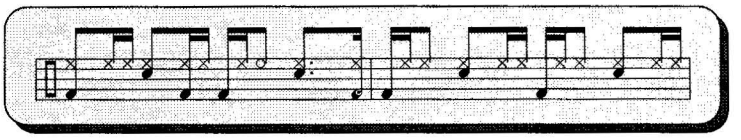


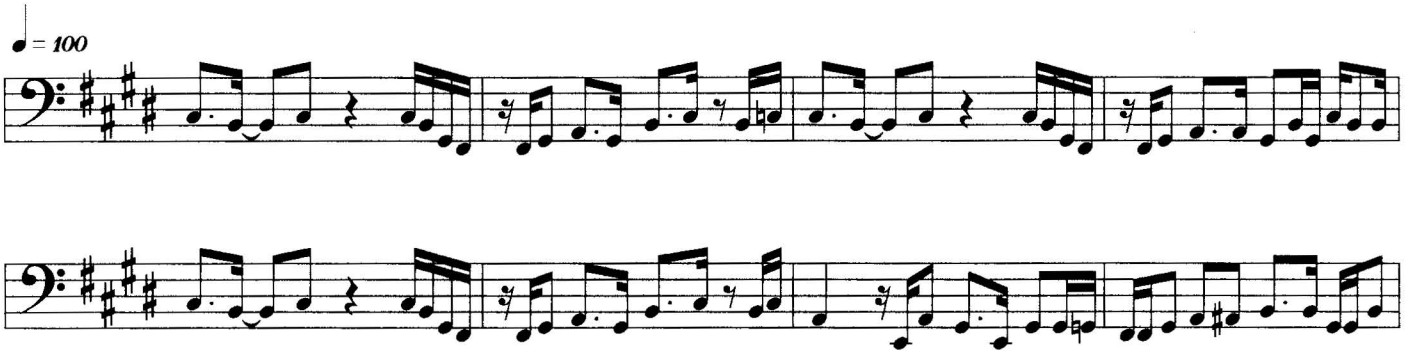
I'm playing this between the 4th and 6th frets. Work on getting a consistant sound on the high strings. At this tempo, this line can go by in a hurry. The picture is showing how I sometimes thumb lines with a closed hand.



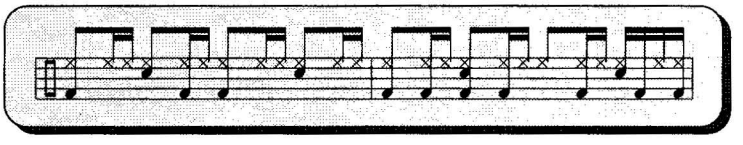


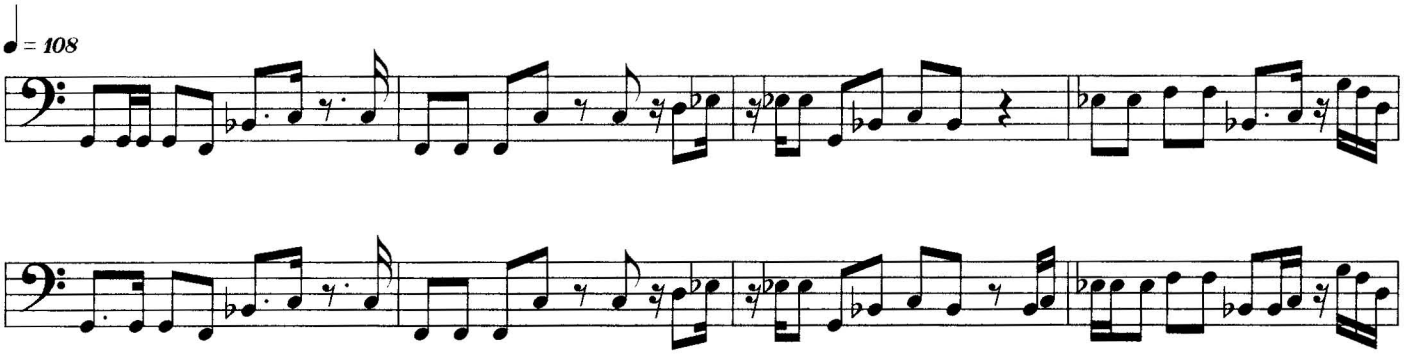
This groove is at a nice tempo that you should be able to work out. I find that drummers and bass players have trouble holding grooves down between 90-100. The tendancy is to rush.



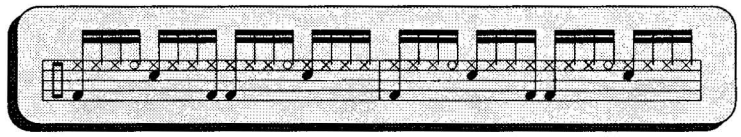


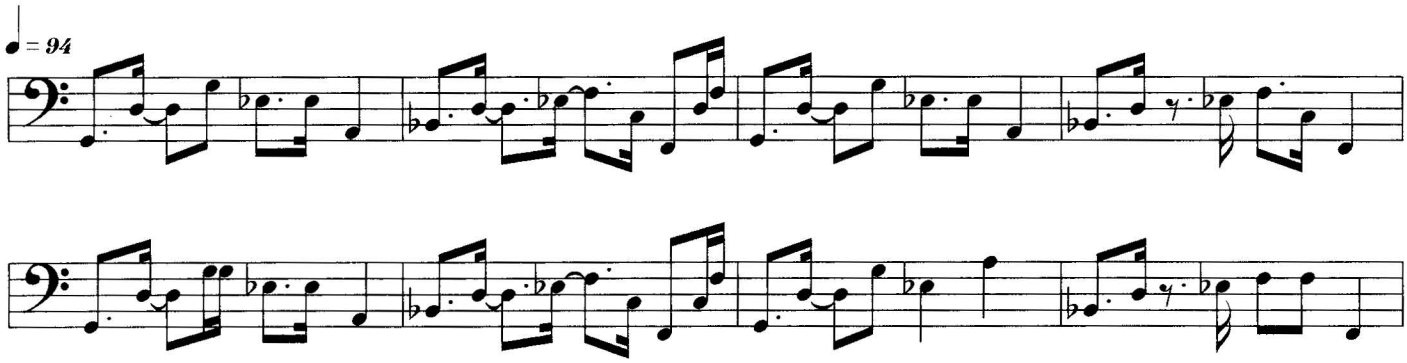
The D in the second measure and the G in the fourth measure are being fretted, so as to keep a consistant sound and tone.



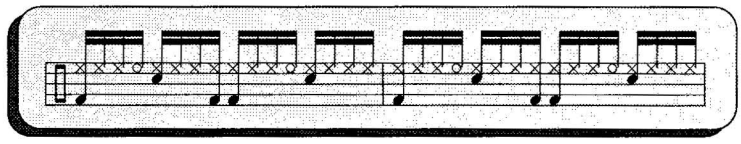


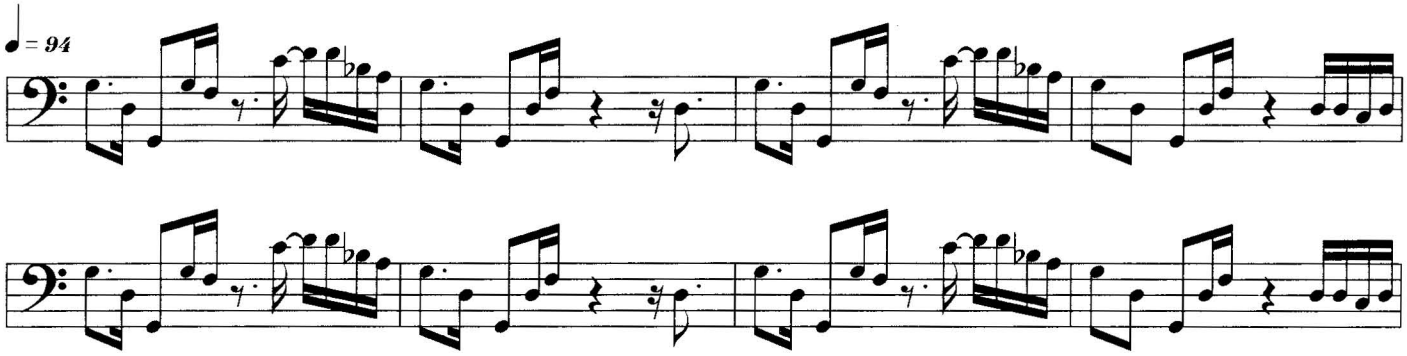
Work on getting the right feel with the tied notes. Also, the fingering in the second and sixth measures may take some time to get clean.



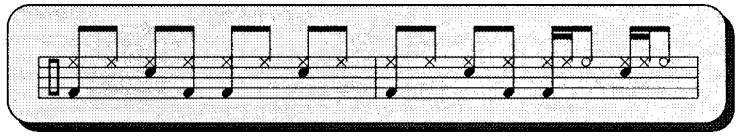


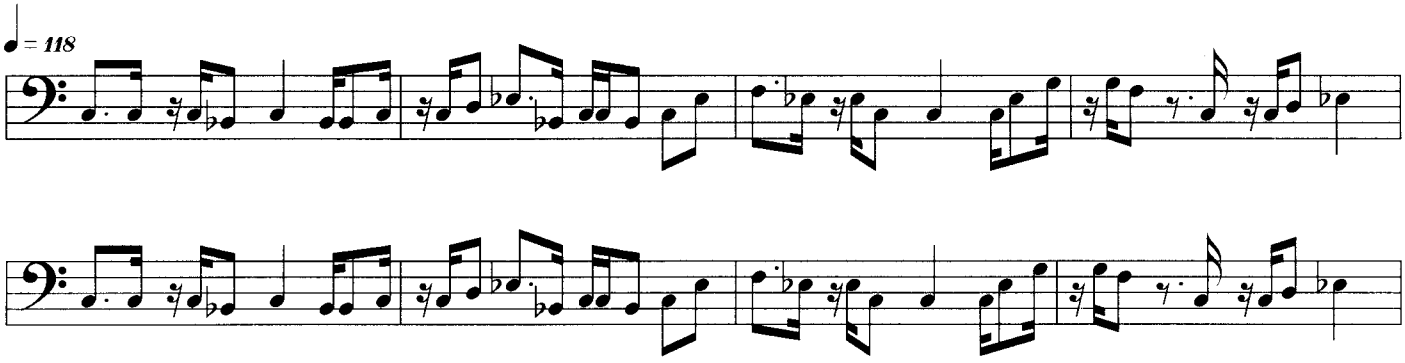
There are some tough fingerings in this line. One of the problem spots is the hammering-on to the D and then thumbing it in the first measure.



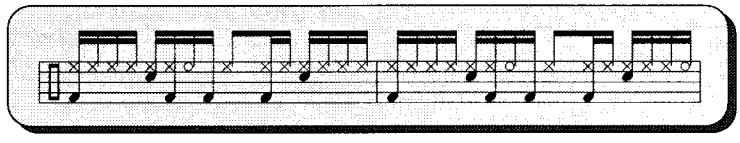


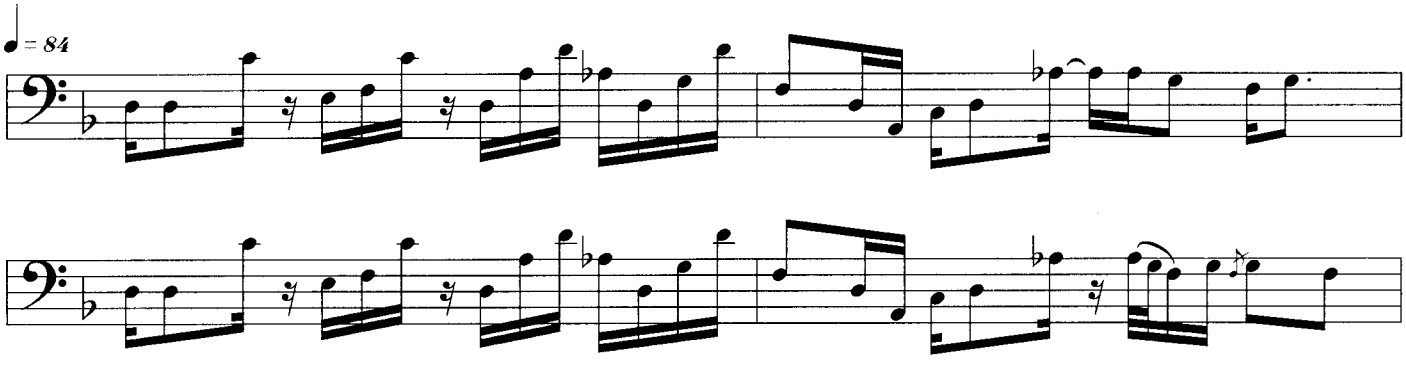
The rhythms in the third and fourth measures may provide some difficulty when trying to get this line up to speed. Make sure you fret the D's in this line.



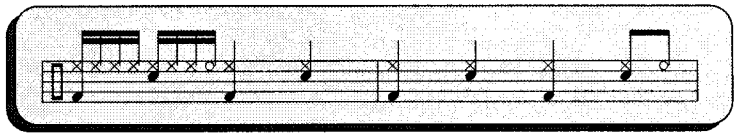


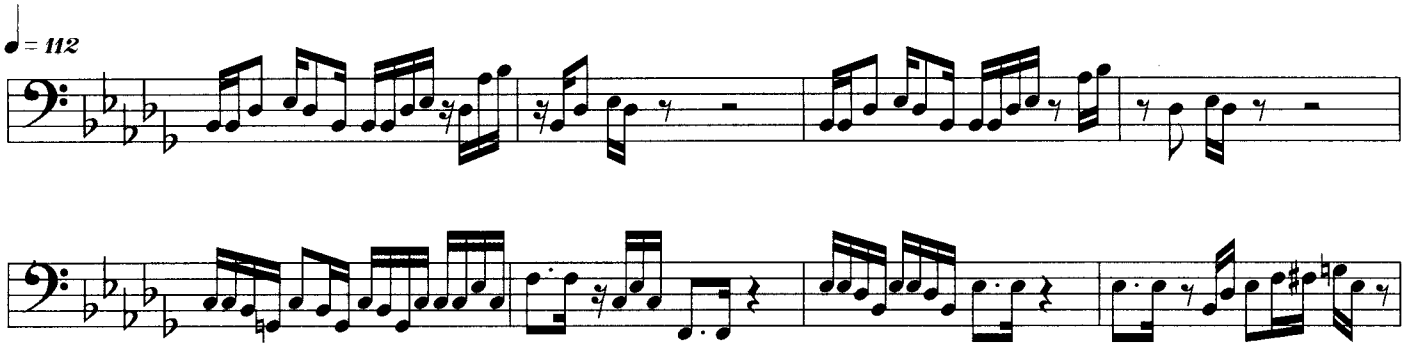
This line was so busy that I only made it four measures. I would treat this as an exercise in fingering, but if it's played well, it grooves hard.



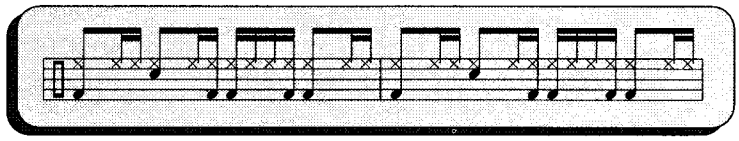


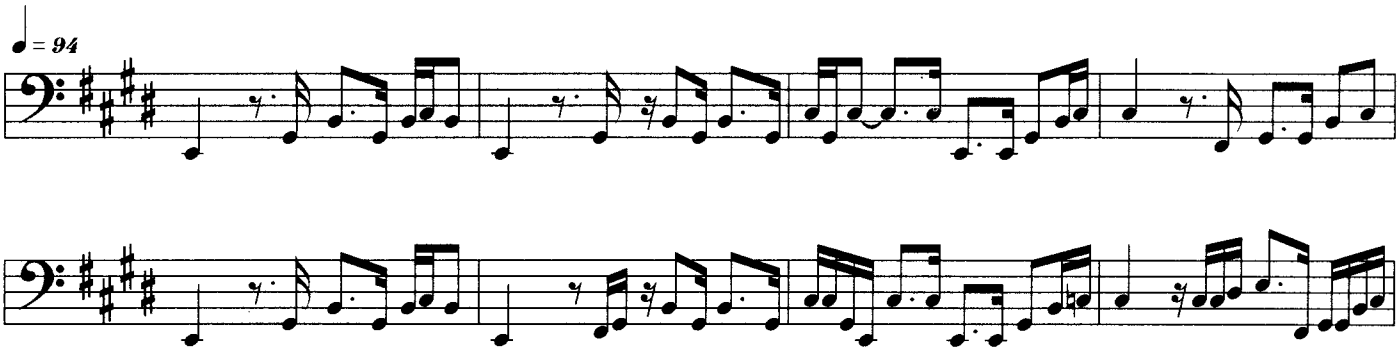
Play your notes very short and clean. This is a line that would normaly be played by a "synth" bass. Try playing it with your fingers and then notice the difference when you play it with your thumb.





Pay attention to the key signature. Notice that most of the measures have nothing happening on beat 2. You should listen to and play off of the snare at those points.



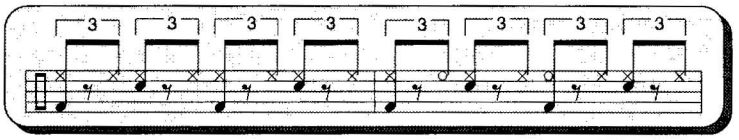


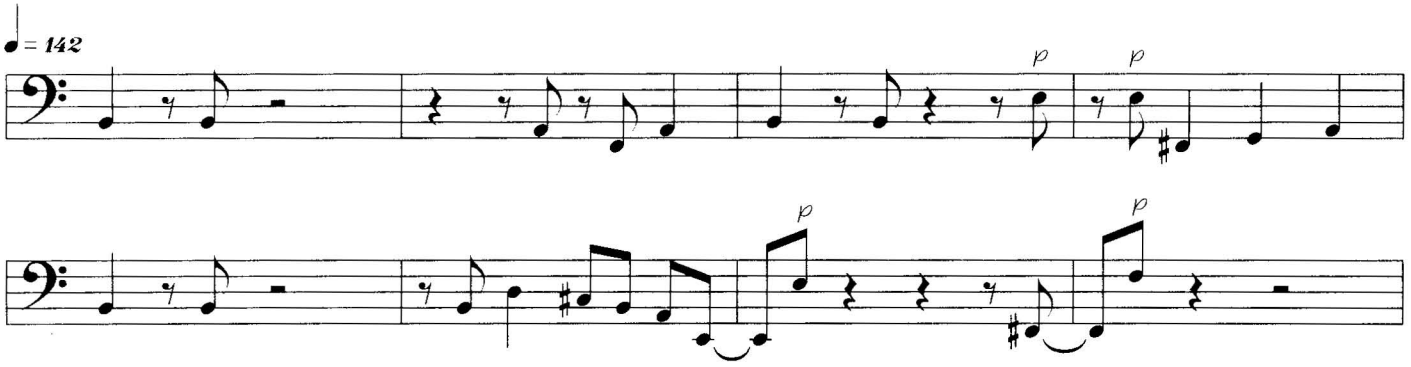
Hip-Hop & Shuffle Grooves

The grooves in this section are hip-hop and shuffle feels that are mixed together throughout this chapter. Shuffle grooves have a triplet feel to them. Keep this in mind when you are practicing improvisations over those lines. Remember what I mentioned earlier about the rhythmic appropriateness of your fills. Most of the shuffles in this section are on the fast side.

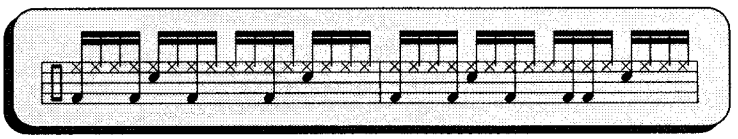
The hip-hop feels all have a level of swing to them. You will want to check out the tape, especially for the drum patterns. Sometimes the hi hat will be swinging and other times the bass drum or snare. Notice how on some of the bass lines quarter and 8th notes will feel straight, but the 16th notes will swing. Other times the 8th notes will swing while the 16th's are straight. The hip-hop feels of today tend to be on the slower side, usually between 80-100 beats per minute. This wasn't always the case. Just a few years ago, hip-hop feels were being played at much faster tempos. I find this style of slap bass the most difficult because there are so many factors involved. The drummer you play with will have a dramatic effect on the level of swing in your bass lines. It can be very difficult to get these lines to sit just right. If they don't, they feel really bad. With this style of playing, you have to be able to adapt to different players and situations. Just like playing jazz, the slower the tempo, the more swing is felt.

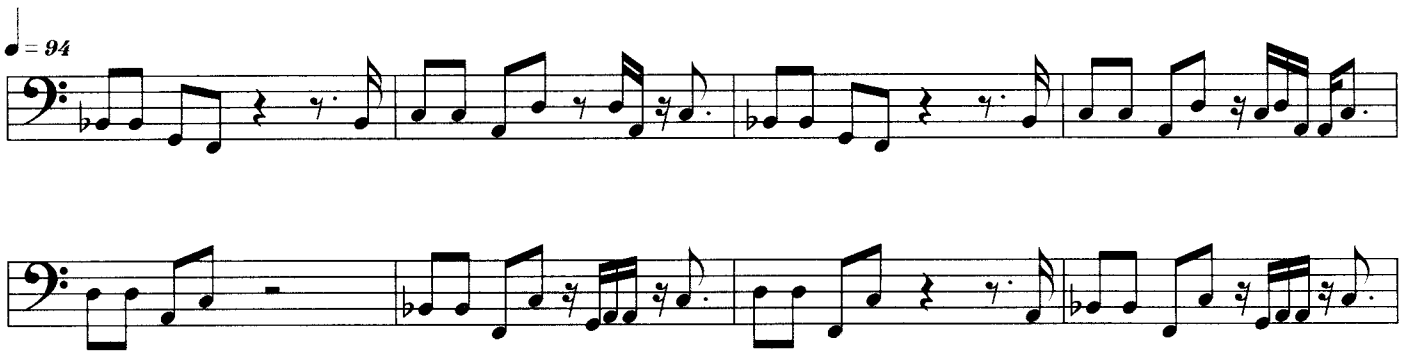
This is a good example of a typical shuffle. There is a lot of space in this line. The tempo makes it more difficult than it seems. The picture is showing how I mute the strings with the side of my hand. This helps to control the length of the notes. Most players think of muting only with their left hand.



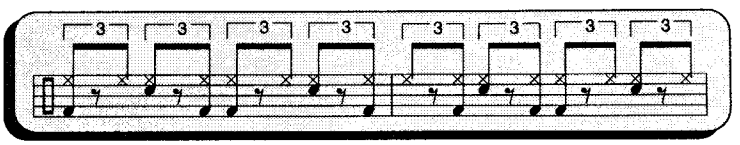


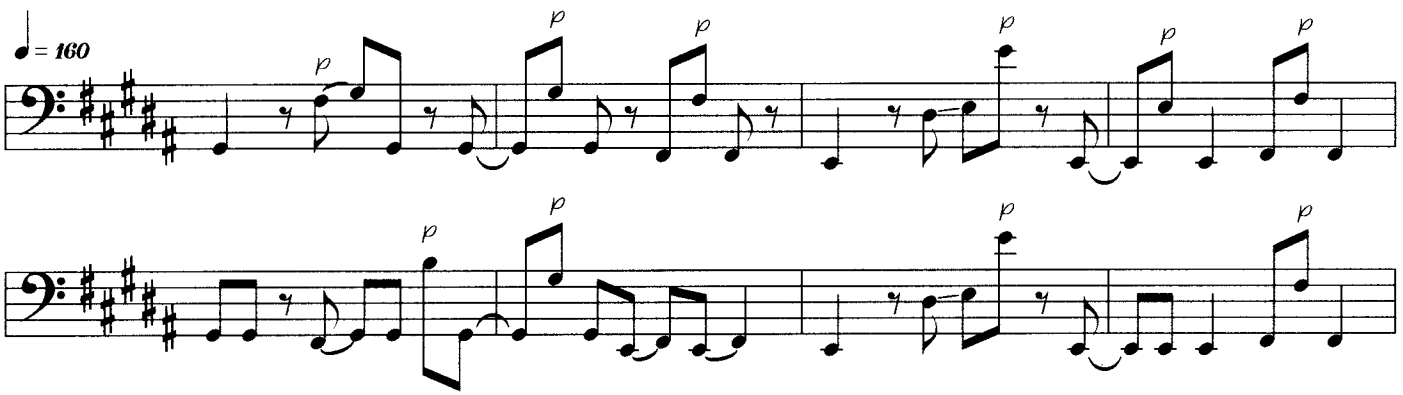
In any hip-hop groove you should work particularly on making the notes swing properly. These lines only sit right in one place.



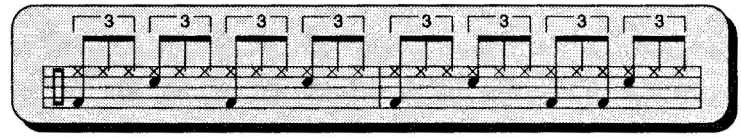


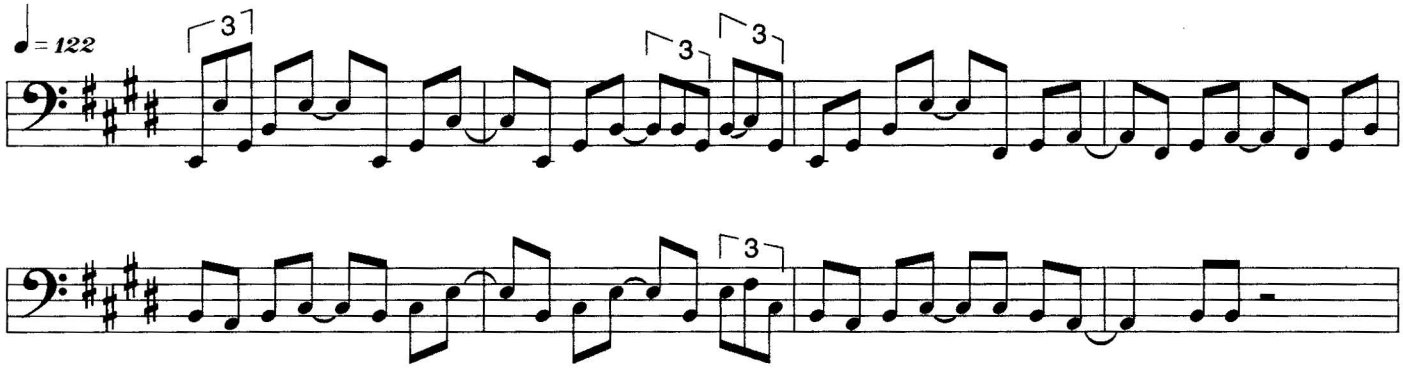
In this shuffle, work on the transitions in the third and fourth measures. Take time to work out fingerings that are smooth.



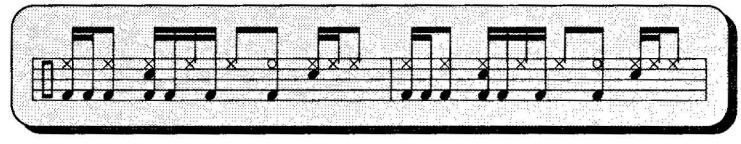


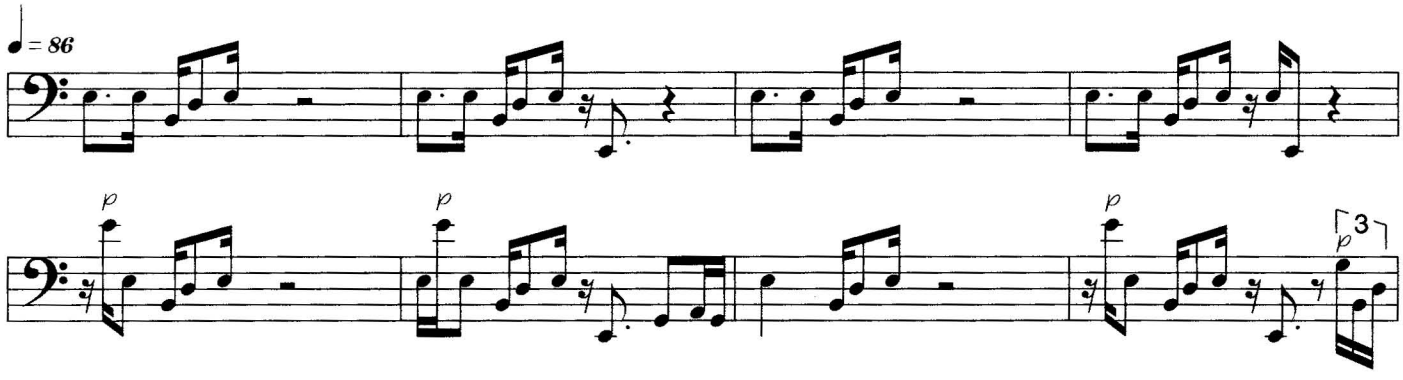
In this shuffle, notice how the line flows with all the ties over the groove. There are some difficult fingerings in the first two measures.



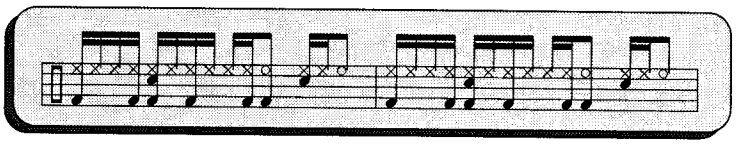


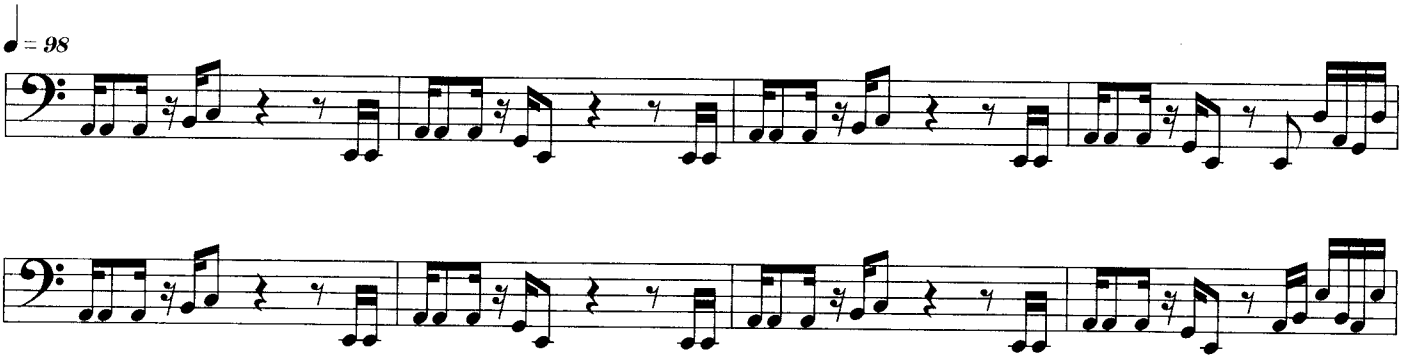
Notice in this hip-hop feel, how I jumped up the octave in the second half of the line. A subtle thing like this allows you to embelish the line, but keep the basic feel in tact.



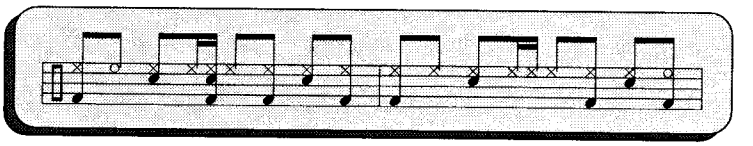


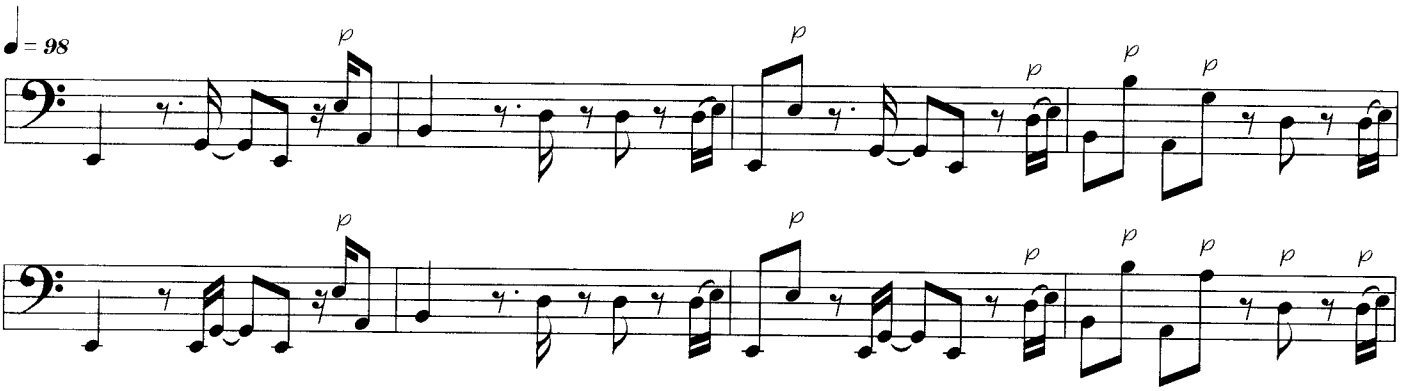
In this hip-hop groove, I am fretting the A's in every measure. Listen to the drums within the space of the bass line



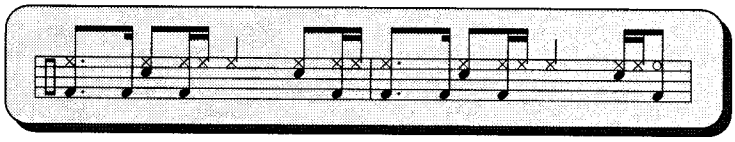


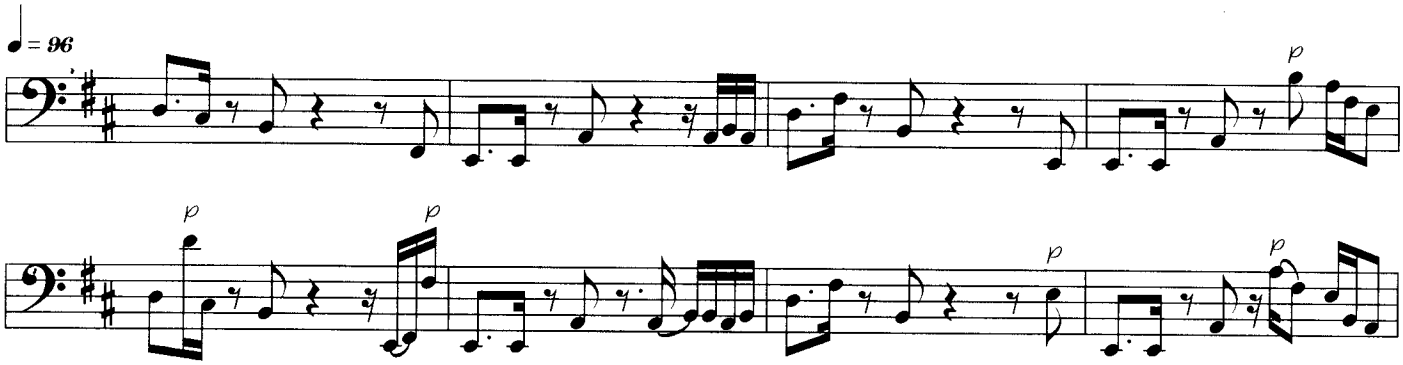
Try playing this hip-hop groove with both open strings and fretted notes. Listen to the difference in the tone. I am using a combination of both.



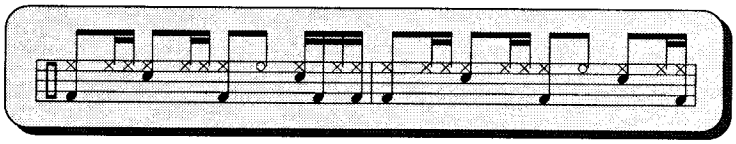


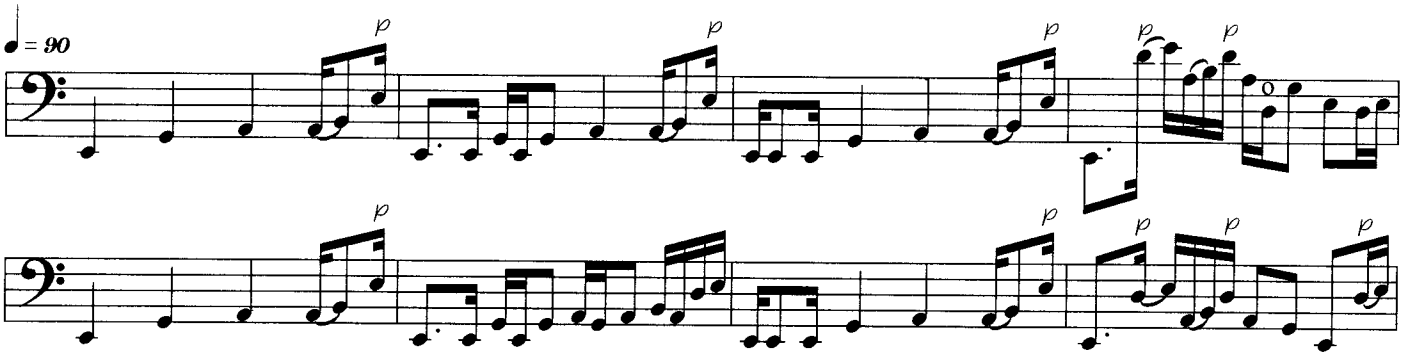
This hip-hop groove has difficult fingerings in the fourth, fifth, and eighth measures. This line is very syncopated, so work on it slowly, making sure to get the rhythms right.



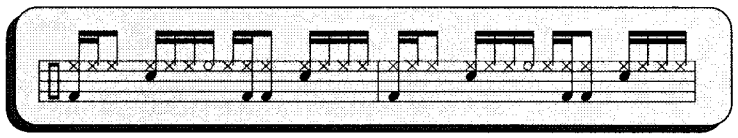


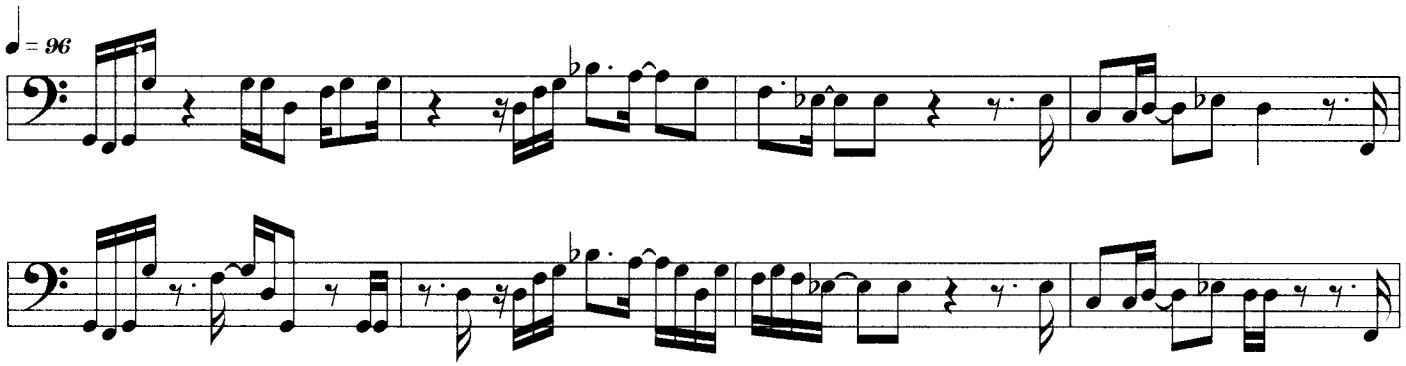
In this hip-hop groove, notice that the measures build in complexity from the first to the fourth measure. The line has the same underlying feel in each measure.



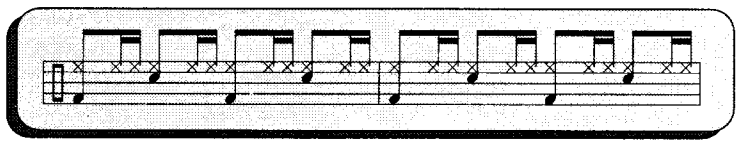


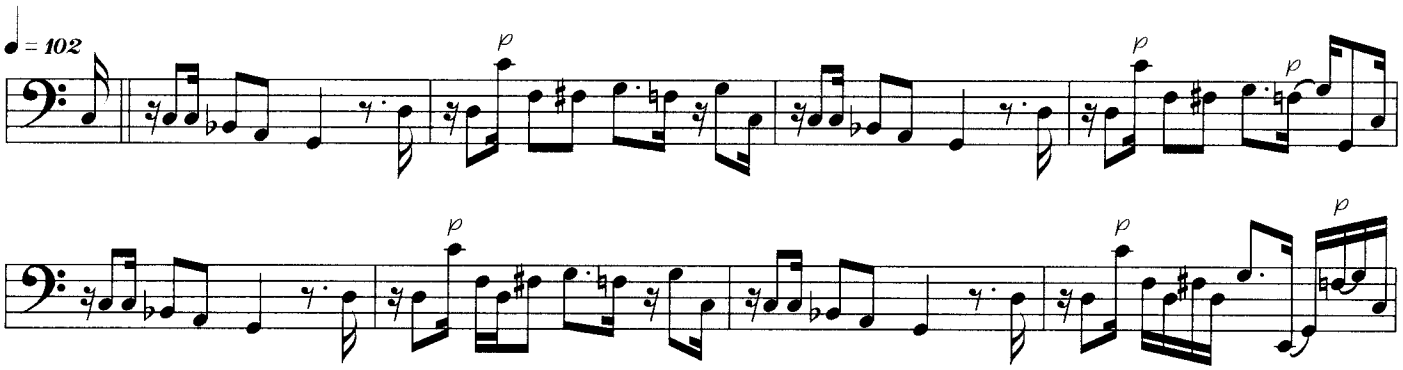
This hip-hop groove is all thumbed. Play the first measure slowly until you get the accuracy fingering the octave. Work on the tough parts and then put it all together.

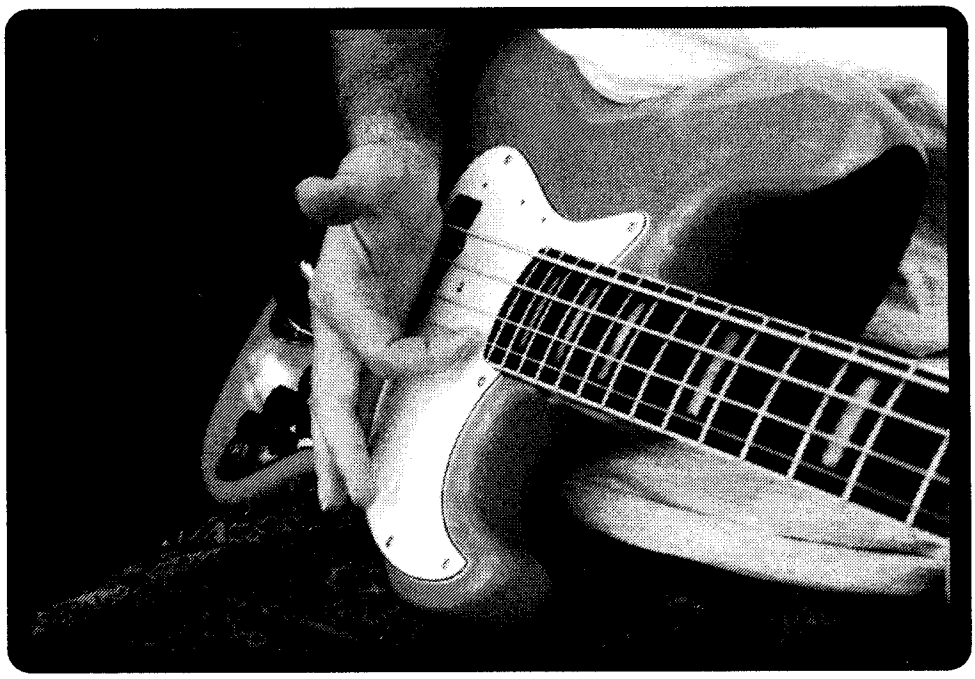




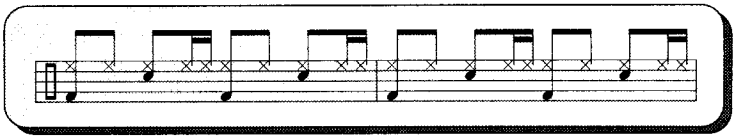
This hip-hop groove is a "synth" bass line that I adapted to the slap style. Work on the difficult fingerings in measures six and eight.

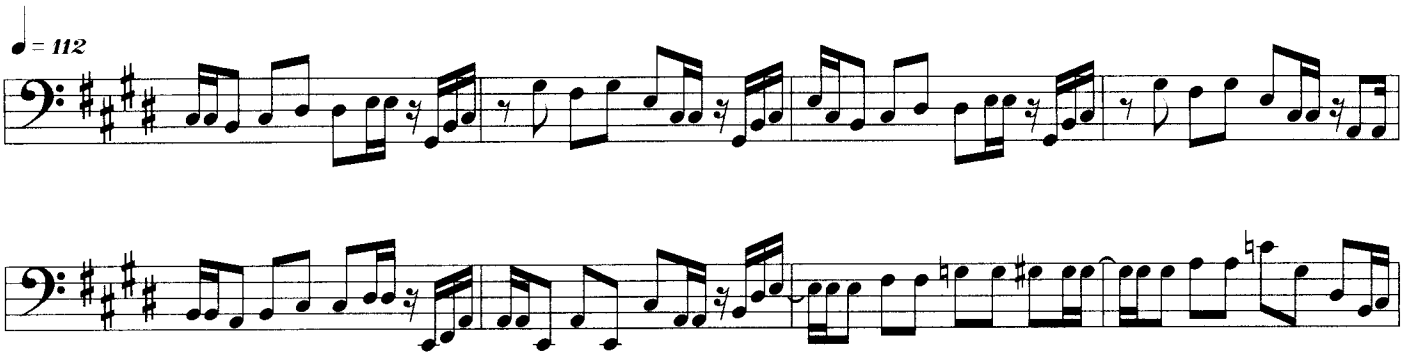




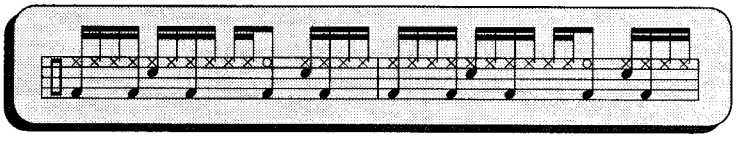


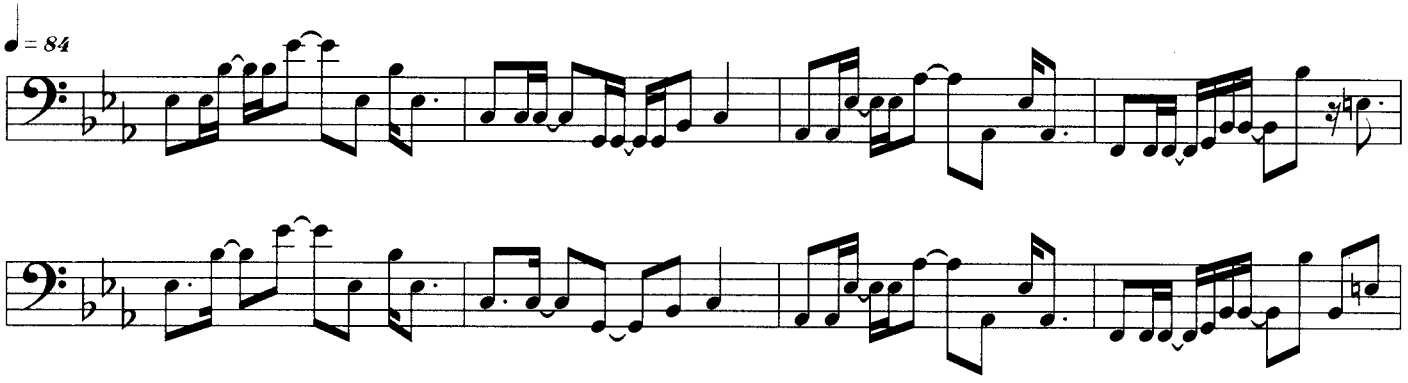
This hip-hop groove is very busy. I find 16th notes particularly difficult to get settled in this style. Try playing the line without open strings. This picture shows how I typically pop the strings with the side of my first finger.



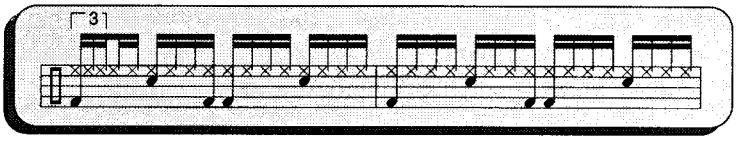


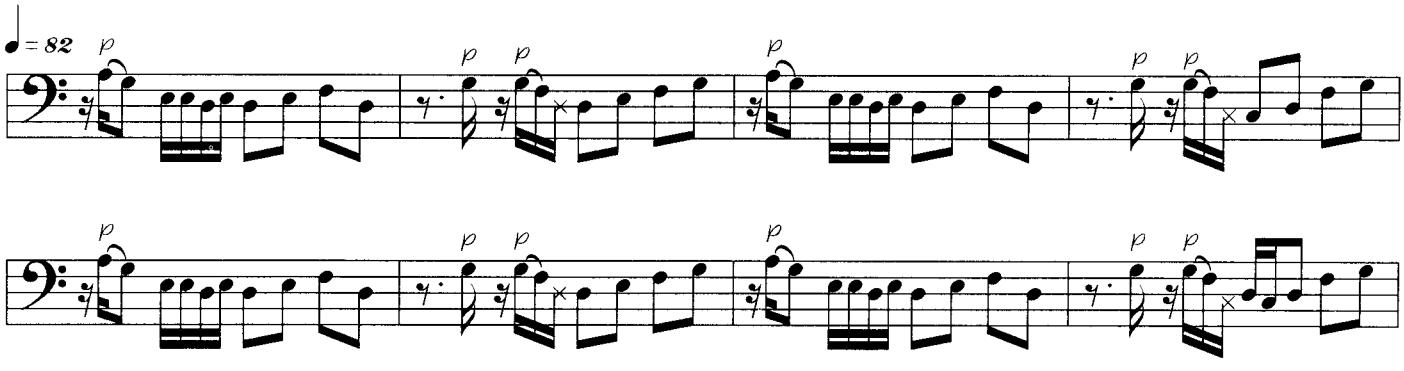
This is a nice slow hip-hop groove. Make sure the rhythms at the beginning of the odd measures flow smoothly. The notes should be played long.



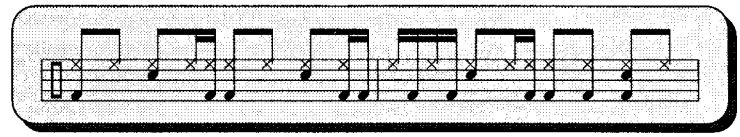


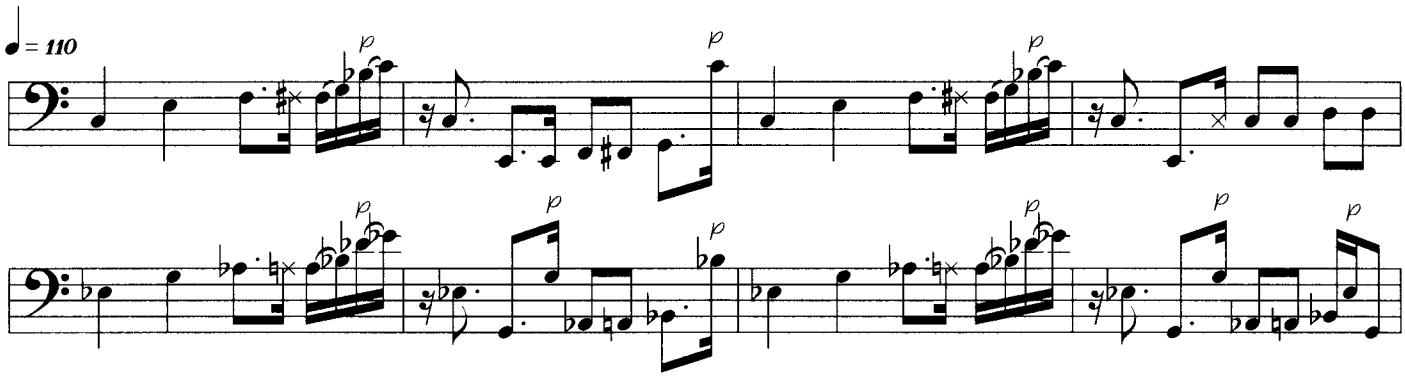
In the hop-hop groove, notice how the 16th notes seem to have more of a swing feel, while the 8th notes are played somewhat straight.



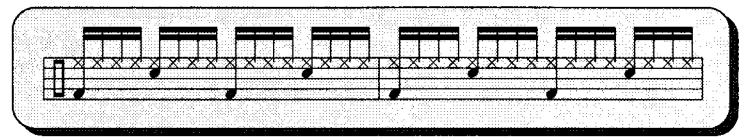


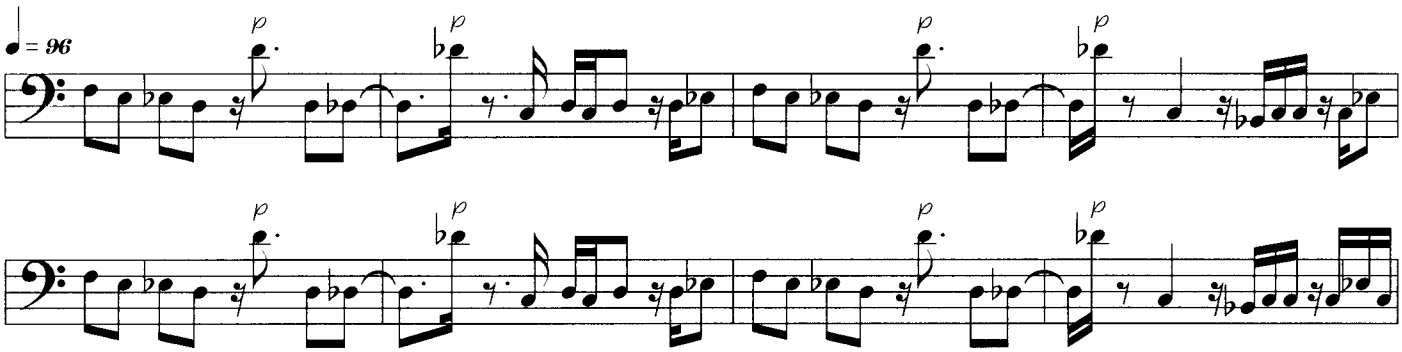
In this hip-hop groove, you will notice that the last four measures are pretty much the same as the first, just transpose up a minor third.



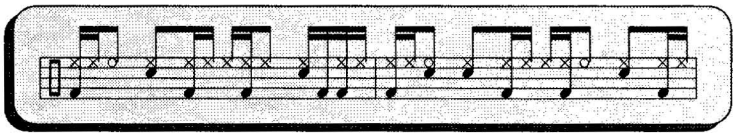


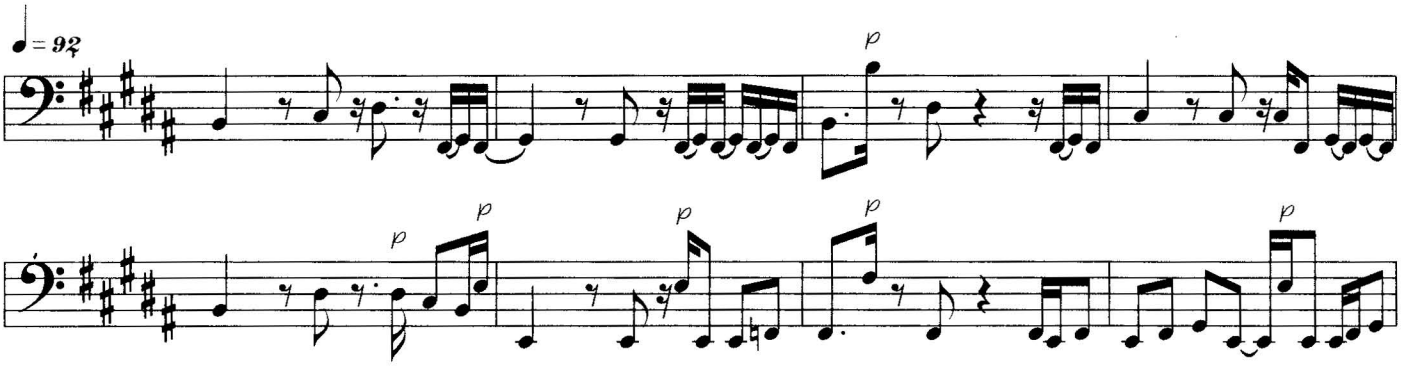
In this hip-hop groove, notice how the 8th notes are straight. The difficulty is in the rhythms at the end of the first and third measures. Players tend to not hold that first rhythm long enough.



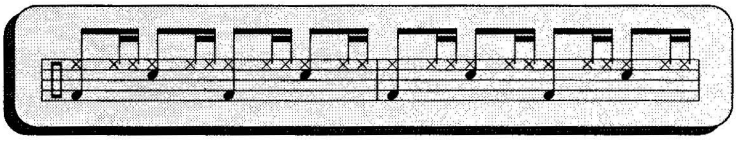


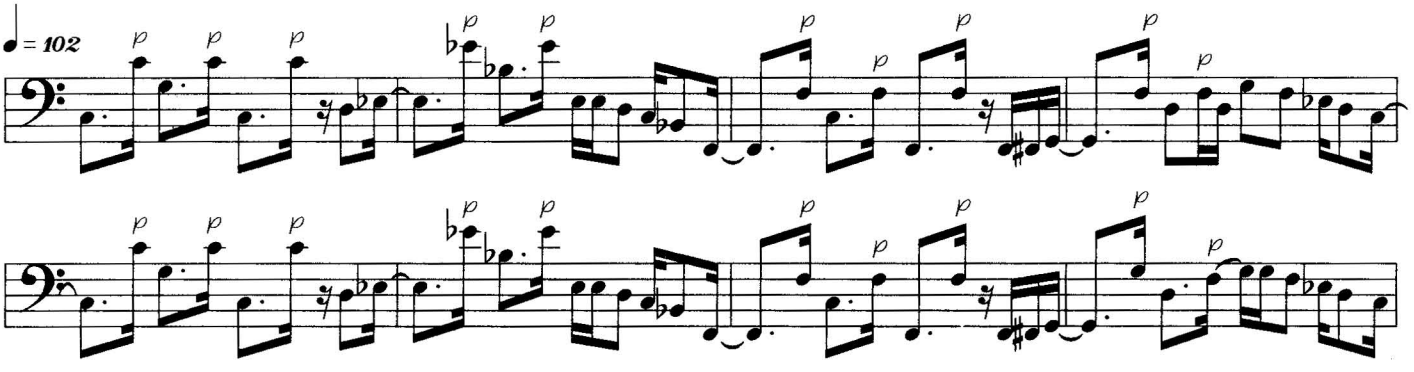
I feel this hip-hop groove is the most difficult line in this book. Try to play this with the correct feel for about five minutes and I'm sure you will agree.





This hip-hop groove is the last in the book. It seems fitting that it incorporates a little bit of everything. It's busy, difficult, and requires a lot of technique.





I would like to thank everyone who purchased this book. You enable independent publishers, like myself, to put out material that I feel there is a need for. If not for you, material like this would not be published by the bigger companies. I would like to thank Rich Appleman and the rest of the Bass department at Berklee, especially Bruce Gertz for giving me the direction and inspiration to publish my own material.

Most of the examples were recorded with a "69" Jazz Bass.

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